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ABSTRACT

The Bernard van Leer Foundation initiated a program in France entitled Relais Enfants-Parents to bring the children of prisoners to the forefront of social, political and judicial policy. The Relais Enfants-Parents program works to safeguard the psychological and emotional development of children by serving as a link between them and their imprisoned parents. The program tries to preserve, and often to recreate, the bond between the children and their parents which separation often weakens. This book shows how Relais Enfants-Parents came into existence with initial resistance from the penal system and doubt from imprisoned parents. The book presents the rationale behind the creation of the program and describes a pilot program that evolved since 1972. Strategies are presented that are used to strengthen parent-child relationships, fortify parent roles, and help children overcome the stressful experience of a first visit to an imprisoned parent. The significance of volunteers, their training, roles, and contributions to helping these children to become a part of the society is discussed. Contains references after each chapter. (MOK)

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Elizabeth Ayre

They won't take no for an answer: the Relais Enfants-Parents

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They won't take no for an answer: the Relais Enfants-Parents

Elizabeth Ayre

Early Childhood Development:
Practice and Reflections
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About the series

The series *Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections* addresses issues of importance to practitioners, policy makers and academics concerned with meeting the educational and developmental needs of disadvantaged children in developing and industrial societies.

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About the author

Elizabeth Ayre, a Cornell University graduate with a background in psychology, is a writer and editor residing in Paris. She was on the staff of the International Herald Tribune and has worked as a consultant on literacy and education at UNESCO. She is currently working on a publication for the European Action Research Committee on Children of Imprisoned Parents.

About the Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a private institution based in The Netherlands that concentrates its resources on support for early childhood development. The Foundation takes its name from Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist who died in 1958 and gave the entire share capital of his worldwide packaging industry for humanitarian purposes. The Foundation's income is derived from this industry.

The Foundation's central objective is to improve opportunities for young children who live in disadvantaged circumstances. It does this by supporting the development of innovative field-based approaches in early childhood development, and by sharing experiences with as wide an audience as possible in order to influence policy and practice.

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All the photographs are taken by Philippe Levivier.

Foreword

In 1991, I went on my first prison visit with Marie-France Blanco. Obtaining permission for this visit entailed sending a letter signed by the Executive Director of the Bernard van Leer Foundation verifying who I am and the purpose of the visit, filling in an application form and sending four passport photographs to the relevant authorities. A while later I received the permit. Upon arrival at the prison gate, the guard produced a copy of the permit that I presented, and after showing my passport we proceeded through several blind doors and security checks. So much for my first encounter with the penal system in France.

After going through such rigorous measures in order to obtain a permit to enter the prison, much to my surprise the huge bag that I was carrying – stuffed with fabric, yarn, wool and other materials for the women detainees to make toys and gifts for their children in the workshops – remained unscrutinised.

Marie-France Blanco is a familiar figure to the prison guards. She has been coming to this prison every Monday, carrying huge bags, since 1986 to lead a workshop for imprisoned mothers. My unchecked bag was a visible sign that the prison administration regarded her as a trustworthy partner and interlocutor.

The detained women began arriving at the workshop casually without much delay. Some were already waiting for us, some greeted us in the corridor saying that they would be coming shortly. Some had brought pieces of work that they had started the week before, on which they just had to put the finishing touches. Others were starting to make new items, and discussed with their fellow inmates what would be most suitable for the age of their child. One woman had started to embroider a beautiful cushion cover for her eight year old daughter. She talked about the letter that she would write to her daughter when sending her the cover. She intended to ask her daughter about her progress at school and her friends. But most of all she wanted to tell her daughter that she was thinking of her and that she loved her.

Other women talked with anxiety in their voices about their children – they were uncertain how their first contact with their children, established through sending

Illustration: logo of the Relais Enfants-Parents

a toy that they had made, would be received by the children. Marie-France reassured them: the child will understand the message conveyed through the object which is a means to bridge the void left by the mother's departure. Marie-France explained how important it is for children to know where their mother is, and of their mother's feelings for them.

Concealing the knowledge of the imprisonment of the parent can have detrimental effects on children's development. The parent's departure may cause feelings of guilt and failure in the children. Children have a right to know where their parents are. The knowledge of their parents' whereabouts is the first step for children in dealing with the loss of a parent and the situations that often follow: the losing of friends; the difficulties entailed in living in a single parent household, in a foster family or in an institution; and the burden of being shunned by those in their environment.

The Relais Enfants-Parents, founded by Marie-France Blanco, has been engaged over the past ten years in maintaining, and – it should be added – in many cases, re-establishing the bond between imprisoned mothers and fathers and their children. It does this by organising toy-making workshops for imprisoned mothers, by helping fathers to re-install a line of communication with their children, by accompanying children on prison visits and by creating play corners in the prison's visiting areas. How these activities are organised and how they begin to mend the child-parent bond are described in the chapters that follow.

Children are mostly accompanied by volunteers on prison visits who come from all walks of life: office clerks, teachers, shop assistants, social workers or housewives. After having undergone initial training by Relais staff, they make a commitment to a child to accompany him or her on visits for the duration of the parent's imprisonment. They fetch the children from their homes, take them to airports, or accompany them on train trips. At times, some children are 'relayed' through three or four volunteers before they arrive at the established visiting time at the prison gate. Volunteers are also involved in many other activities: in packing and sending off thousands of hand-made toys to children; in animating the play corners in the prisons; and in fundraising for and administrating the eleven local associations. The volunteers are the backbone of the organisation, says Marie-France.

Working with Relais Enfants Parents has been a special experience for the Foundation. Within six years we have seen this organisation grow from a small group of dedicated professionals and volunteers to a network of associations spanning the whole of France. While

our funds made up half of Relais' budget in 1990, they accounted for only one eighteenth of the network's budget in 1995.

More important, however, is the fact that we are supporting an organisation where the child's interests and concerns are at centre stage. To the Relais it is the child around which its work revolves: whether this is while working with fathers and mothers in prisons, convincing caregivers to provide children with the opportunity to visit their parent, seeking visiting permits from prison directors or judges, or interacting with prison-based social workers or prison staff.

The child's perspective is what counts.

Henriette Heimgaertner
Programme Specialist
Bernard van Leer Foundation

Glossary

Aide Sociale a l'Enfance et a la Famille (A.S.E.) – Statutory body for child and family support. Professionals have recourse to the administrative system through A.S.E., which deals with children at risk. Similar to the social services department in Britain.

Assistante maternelle – Childminders taking care of toddlers in their own home; family day care is coordinated and supervised by the A.S.E. on departmental level.

Centre de détention – A penal establishment for medium sentences and prisoners reaching the end of their terms. According to the Ministry of Justice a *centre de détention* 'houses convicts considered as having the best prospects for reinsertion. Thus, the *centre de détention* are geared mainly towards reinsertion.' There are 23 *centres de détention* in France.

Conseil général – France is divided into 95 administrative *départements*; the Conseil Général is the departmental governing body responsible *inter alia* for preventive health, social and welfare services.

Conseil régional – Following an administrative reform in the early 1980s, regions were formed comprising two or more *départements*; the Conseil Régional is the regional governing body.

Crèche familiale – regular supervision/support meetings of all local *Assistantes Maternelles* with a *puéricultrice* of the A.S.E.; meetings take place in a public day care centre and children are taken care of in the centre during the meeting.

Direction des Affaires Sanitaires et Sociales (D.D.A.S.S.) – Health and social services at the departmental level.

Educateur/educatrice – a general term for child care workers and child welfare workers; educators working within penitentiaries are in charge of reinsertion and family relations.

Espaces enfants – play areas.

Espaces rencontres – Family mediation services. Meeting facilities for children and parents are set up outside the prison premises where they can reacquaint themselves with each other shortly before or after the parents' release.

Fondation de France – A private organisation created at the initiative of Charles de Gaulle and André Malraux in 1969 to assist philanthropic initiatives and to administer legacies.

Juge des affaires de famille – Judges specialising in family affairs, such as divorce.

Juge de l'application des peines – Judges who intervene after a sentence has been pronounced to deal with the individual's specific needs, e.g. inmates who request home leave to see their children.

Juge des enfants – Judges specialising in cases involving children. Instituted in 1945. They deal primarily with penal cases of juvenile delinquents and child protection. Authorised to intervene when the health, safety, morality of the child is endangered (as opposed to cases of children at risk, who are dealt with by the A.S.E.).

Maison d'arret – A prison for inmates on remand and for individuals charged with a crime and serving short sentences, usually less than one year. There are 118 *maisons d'arrêt* in France.

Maison centrale – Maximum security prison for inmates serving heavy sentences. There are five *maisons centrales* in France.

Parloir d'avocat – Visiting areas in prisons where lawyers meet with their imprisoned clients.

Parloir de famille – Visiting areas in prisons where families meet with inmates.

Permanences éducatives – Bi-monthly counselling sessions open to fathers who wish to drop by to talk.

Protection Maternelle Infantile (P.M.I.) – statutory service responsible for health care of children under six years old; supervisory responsibility for all public and private child care provisions.

Puéricultrice – A nursery caregiver with a medical training as opposed to an *éducatrice* trained in child development as a holistic concept; a *puéricultrice* is entitled to be head of nurseries and day care provisions after five years' experience in maternity wards or P.M.I. services.

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Notes

NB: all names are pseudonyms.

Amounts are given in US Dollars. The conversion rate used is USD 1 = 5 French Francs.

Introduction

> Experience has taught us that we have only one enduring weapon in our struggle against mental illness: the emotional discovery and emotional acceptance of the truth in the individual and unique history of our childhood.[1]
>
> Psychologist Alice Miller

The winter air cuts through the morning light like a cold knife. A wiry child jumps up onto a wheelbarrow and yells towards the stark prison wall. 'Daddy, daddy, it's me!' A few minutes later, a white handkerchief flutters between the bars to signal that the father is listening. 'Guess what! Mummy just bought me a new shirt!' Maintaining dialogue between imprisoned parents and their children, such as in this scene at a prison in Rouen, does not always involve such extremes, but the difficulties in maintaining a bond when the parent is in prison must be recognised.

France's legal system has been closely tied, in principle, to the raising of children, with historical claims that they belong as much to the State as to the parents.[2] However, there is one category which the system has bypassed: the children of prisoners. They have been referred to as 'forgotten children', 'hidden victims of imprisonment', or 'orphans of justice'. But no matter how they are labelled, this group is hardly acknowledged as one facing special and often multiple difficulties and predicaments. Indeed, these children are frequently overlooked as comprising a group in its own right, as the issue of prisoners' children is often confused with that of the small number of infants born and living inside prisons with their mothers. Of the approximately 85,000 people either serving sentences or in custody on remand in French prisons each year, approximately 80 per cent are parents. Although women make up less than five per cent of inmates in France, over 80 per cent of

incarcerated females are mothers. Given that it has been established that a satisfactory mother-child relationship is 'essential' to adult mental health,[3] and that the imprisonment of either parent often leads to distress, stigma and psychological trauma during a child's crucial formative years, what happens to the estimated 140,000 children in France whose parents are incarcerated?[4]

The noted Swiss psychologist Alice Miller has spent her life examining the destructive forces in children's lives. Her case studies of hundreds of violent convicts have revealed patterns in childhood experiences of poverty, physical and sexual abuse, emotional and physical deprivation, and abandonment and rejection by one or both parents, which precludes proper bonding. Imprisonment of one or both of a young child's parents can precipitate trauma involving social exclusion, greater financial difficulties, and what can be perceived as abandonment and rejection, particularly as family members and caregivers often go to great lengths to conceal the truth of the parent's whereabouts. A child's response to trauma is always tempered by such variables as age, gender, personality and relationships, and sweeping generalisations must be avoided. Systematic long-term follow-up studies have yet to be carried out, but research has revealed that children of inmate mothers seem to experience similar patterns of homelessness, poverty, separation from one or both parents and institutional care, which female offenders have often suffered themselves as children.[5] Although the role of marginalisation in perpetuating this cycle must not be discounted, it has been demonstrated in France that approximately 30 per cent of imprisoned inmates were children of imprisoned parents themselves.[6] Parents and Children Together (PACT), a Texas-based service and advocacy group, estimates that a child whose parent goes to prison is five times more likely than the average child to become delinquent, thus fuelling a cycle of hostility, aggression, exclusion and alienation.[7]

A small association in a southwestern suburb of Paris has been waging a quiet battle to shatter this cycle, and to bring these forgotten children to the fore of social, political and judicial policy in France. 'There is no reason why a child should pay the price of a parent in prison,' says Marie-France Blanco, the founder and director of the Relais Enfants-Parents/Ile-de-France (hereafter, 'the Relais'), which aims to safeguard the psychological and emotional development of the child by serving as a link between imprisoned parents and their offspring. It is a holistic approach, not only working with the child, but also focusing gradually on all the actors who come into play in the child's environment to produce healthier family dynamics.

Yet the Relais' message is clear: the child is at the heart of its action. They are entitled to the truth about their parents' incarceration, and words comprehensible to them must be attached to emotions and situations. Above all, the children must be able to maintain a link with both parents if separated from one or both, a right stipulated in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[3]

These children represent the future. The work done by the Relais, which the Bernard van Leer Foundation began supporting in 1990, is not merely an act of humanity or benevolence. It is an investment, a long-term vision which aims to shatter the cycle of imprisonment and to stimulate the potential of the child in order to produce viable, healthy adults. Conversely, the work of the Relais is instrumental in the rehabilitation and reintegration of an inmate, whose return to society hinges partly on how relationships can be maintained during imprisonment. Children and the quality of the parents' relationship with their children assume an important role in rebuilding prisoners' lives, thus helping to prevent recidivism. Breaking the cycle of imprisonment is not only an investment in terms of children's well-being, but also in terms of costs to society.

This investment entails overcoming resistance to the issue – the resistance of family members and caregivers who wish to 'protect' the child; of judges who believe that prison is 'no place for children'; of the general public who think that a child should have 'better' role models; of imprisoned parents themselves who cannot face the shame. Headway is being made in changing attitudes and mentalities. But the public in general, as Miller stresses, is still far from realising that our earliest experiences unfailingly affect society as a whole.[4]

Notes and References

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2. Foster, Marie-Claude (1994), 'Droit de Regard au Nom de l'Etat: The Juge des Enfants and Child Protection in France.' In: *Children & Society*, Vol. 8:3, National Children's Bureau, London.

3. Bowlby, John (1951), *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, World Health Organisation Monograph.

4. Statistics concerning imprisoned parents and children are Relais estimates based on Justice Ministry statistics. Precise figures are difficult to obtain, as few records are kept on the number of children an inmate has. A 1993 Justice Ministry survey put the number of children at approximately 60,000 for that year. However, male inmates frequently do not disclose that they are parents when asked, particularly

not to those in any official capacity, and women often conceal the existence of young children for fear that they will be placed in institutions or foster care.

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8. Resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on the report of the Third Committee (A/44/736 and Corr. 1), December 1989.

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Chapter 1

Bridging two worlds

The Relais is the only organisation in France to focus on preserving the bond between children and their imprisoned parents from both inside and outside prisons. A non-profit organisation, the Relais was founded in 1986 on the principle that children of incarcerated parents have rights which must be respected: the right to the truth concerning their mothers' or fathers' imprisonment; the right to work towards a healthy separation *vis-à-vis* the parent – without being used as leverage or compensation by judicial authorities, family members or others; and, ultimately, the right to maintain the link with both parents regardless of geographical distance or the nature of the crime, as embodied in Article 9 (3) of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

> States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests.

In sum, the Relais restores the child's place in the parent-child relationship. There are many advocacy groups, seeking to make child-parent prison visits more flexible and to improve visiting conditions, that act on behalf of the children. But the Relais goes one step further than these and gives the child a voice in the decision-making process. Once children express the wish to visit their parents, the Relais strives to provide as neutral a setting as possible to permit interpersonal relations to unfold.

According to Blanco,

> 'Room must be made for the child. The child must be given a full deck of cards to play with in life. Each child has his or her own individual story, and the Relais enters the family milieu and tries to hand this story back to the child. This is the goal of the Relais.'

To accomplish this goal, the Relais uses five basic measures: operating crafts workshops in prisons where parents symbolically re-create the bond by making toys and clothing for their children; obtaining visiting permits and accompanying children from caregivers' homes and institutions to the prisons to visit their parents; running *espaces enfants*, or play areas, for children within prisons; providing mediation services to improve communication between caregivers and inmates and/or former inmates; and providing individual counselling. Professionals and volunteers accompany children along the often rocky path towards the parent, trying to find new bases for interaction and love both inside and outside prisons.

Blanco likens the Relais' work to the baton handed from one runner to the next in a relay race – a small instrument needed to win a race. One of the organisation's goals is to enable the 'baton' to be passed from parent to child. The baton could be a small object made in one of the workshops, or a letter which the Relais helps an imprisoned mother to write. But the instrument need not be a tangible object; the means of achieving the goal could be the welfare worker who begins to get involved in the child's visit and thus becomes sensitised to the concerns of an imprisoned mother, or perhaps the caregiver family that gradually recognises the constructive nature of the parent-child visit. It may also involve convincing an airline to donate free tickets so a child can visit his or her parent in a far-off prison, or bringing a baby born to a mother in prison to visit an incarcerated father. The Relais listens to all concerned parties and, despite the obstacles, manages to carry the baton back and forth.

The child's best interests

How does the UN Convention mentioned above apply to five year old Luc, currently living with his maternal uncle, who wants to visit his father, who has been sentenced to prison for having killed his mother? Who determines what, exactly, a child's best interests are, and how they are best met? Children placed in foster homes and institutions, or living with family members, are often denied the opportunity to visit their parents. Some caregivers may not want to accompany the child to prison; others opt to deny the existence of an imprisoned parent. Some inmates may also refuse visits to 'protect' their child, while the child may wish to see the parent.

There is no coherent policy in France concerning the children of prisoners, no budgetary line item, nor any one statutory body. Few systematic records are kept on the number of children of each inmate; data for individuals on remand are particularly lacking. The

Relais operates within this vacuum. It determines how to act in each child's story, case by case and, during the course of its work, it changes attitudes in a country often less concerned with issues such as maintaining the child-parent bond than with maintaining the *status quo*.

Shattering misconceptions

Separation is a fundamental part of an individual's development. 'One must realise that the phenomenon of separation is at the heart of all living processes,' said the psychoanalyst René Clément during a seminar held by the Relais shortly before his death in 1993. 'There is dependence, attachment and separation. It is around this sequence that a personality is constructed, a relationship to existence established.' At separation, the child relinquishes symbiosis with the mother and progresses towards individuation and autonomy. It is the culmination of a process made possible only after the child has internalised the parental image.

If separation occurs abruptly before the internalisation process is complete, the result is that a child cannot anchor his or her position within the family configuration, or found his or her existence. The interruption of individuation and the rupture of the bond may lead to separation anxiety, feelings of abandonment and rejection, clinging behaviour, fantasies in which parents are idealised or demonised, and other repercussions.

Although it is difficult to generalise about the impact of separation by imprisonment on a child, given the multiple variables which intervene – the child's age, length of the prison term, family dynamics, the stability of the parental couple, the social environment – certain patterns can be distinguished if the child perceives the separation as abandonment.[1] Feelings of abandonment often lead to regressive patterns of behaviour, characterised by fear, resentment and aggression. Children tend to over-react when frustrated and transform the authority figure into a persecutor to be destroyed or avoided. Attachment frequently becomes synonymous with loss; any attempt at affection is discredited and seen as derisive or as a threat. Children who feel abandoned perceive themselves as being unworthy of love, 'bad' children, which can lead to feelings of guilt.

Alain Bouregba, a psychoanalyst and early childhood specialist who has been with the Relais since 1988 explains:

> 'Such ruptures inevitably lastingly impair self-esteem. The child's future socialisation is compromised. This is how the

> wheels of a whole series of mechanisms are often set into motion, too often exposing the child to social dysfunctionalism.'

In short, if a child is not allowed to differentiate emotional separation from physical separation, the parents' absence can transform the parent-child bond into psychological bondage – particularly since an absent parent often takes up more space in a child's life than the parent who is at hand. He continues,

> 'The Relais aims to facilitate this differentiation, by striving to allow imprisoned parents – alienated from their children's daily world – to articulate their role as parent. At the same time, the Relais aims to help the children recognise their attachment to their incarcerated parents.'

A first step is to tell the children the truth about their parents in words accessible to them; the children can thus begin to grasp that it was their parents' 'naughty' or 'bad' behaviour, not their own, which took them away. They have not been abandoned, the parents were coerced to leave. Blanco adds,

> 'Children are in a perfect position to understand what a law is. Their own lives are marked with what is permissible and what is taboo. So they fully understand that grown-ups have laws to respect as well, or they'll be punished, just as they themselves would be. And they must be told that prison imposes limits in terms of the law, but not in terms of love. The key is that the children's knowing that their parents still love them.'

Children are frequently lied to concerning the circumstances of a parent's absence, even though they may have witnessed the arrest. This is particularly true when a remand in custody or a short sentence of imprisonment is ordered. Children are told that the parent is on a trip, away on business, or in the hospital, the last fuelling anxiety over the parent's health. One female inmate at Fleury-Mérogis prison described how her four year old son believed that she was vacationing by the sea. Families think that they are acting in the child's interest, to 'protect' him. But little pitchers have big ears, as Shakespeare wrote in Richard III, and a child often experiences feelings of betrayal, hurt and anger upon learning the truth. Here is what one boy recounted:

> 'I was 10 years old at the time. I was on vacation at my grandmother's house. Then one day someone told me "you're staying here." That was all. No explanation. I was

> living alone with my mother, and suddenly she disappeared. Had she died? Or abandoned me? What could I possibly have done to bring on this kind of punishment? My grandmother never said a word about it, and gave me the eye whenever I mentioned the subject. I remember the fight at school, when someone yelled "Your mother's in the slammer, you loser!" Just like that ... Why hadn't anyone told me?'

If questions about an absent parent remain unanswered, a taboo is established, precluding the child from understanding and reflecting on certain realities that are part of his or her life. The child psychiatrist Professor Paolo Ferrari, while speaking at the European Colloquium on Family Ties and Imprisonment held in Paris in November 1994, stressed the importance of talking to children about what is hurting them: 'Psychological support cannot conceal the fault of the parent, but does allow him or her to retain a human dimension.'

Through intervention, the Relais emphasises to caregivers and parents the importance of telling children the truth about their parents' incarceration and even about the nature of the crime. For example, in one case involving a male inmate at Melun who had killed his wife, the Relais psychologist accompanying the five year old son (who had witnessed the death) reminded the father several times during the monthly prison visit to speak to the child about what had happened to his mother. The child thus understands that it was not he, but the father who was responsible for the mother 'leaving'; he gradually begins to comprehend that she neither rejected nor abandoned him.

Relais psychologists and staff have observed that children seem relieved when told the truth about a parent's absence. Blanco explains,

> 'When children are first separated from their parents, there is a real psychological and physical absence, a lack of affection and tenderness. If words are attached to this absence, the children gradually begin to accept the relationship in another form. They start to create something else and this helps them become more autonomous. It's a question of transforming the initial suffering.'

A custom-made approach

The Relais' methodology is to work for children and with children. But each child is unique, with his or her own individual life

circumstances and case history. The Relais' multidisciplinary team strives to take into account all the components of a child's make-up, a psychoanalytical approach that follows the evolution of each case history. When necessary, the Relais provides therapeutic intervention, adjusting it according to the child's specific needs – the antithesis of a systematised 'assembly-line' approach. 'Our methodology is both rigorously professional and homespun,' says Blanco. 'It cannot be ossified into a rigid system. Each and every person has a history.' The Relais' approach is intuitive, with individual situations being unravelled and intervention tailored to assessed needs. Nothing is forced. 'You have to know how to keep your distance, avoid projecting your own fears onto what are other people's problems, and never decide anything in the place of the parent or child,' explains Blanco. Here is one example to illustrate the Relais' approach of creating settings which allow relationships to unfold naturally:

> During a women's workshop at Fleury-Mérogis prison, one young inmate on remand for substance abuse speaks about her reluctance to allow her 10 year old son to visit her. She has not seen him for seven months. The child wishes to see her. 'It's very delicate,' she says, putting the final touches on a black and brown toque she has made for the boy. In cases such as this, the Relais does not pressure the woman to allow the visit. Rather, it encourages the other women present, who do see their children regularly, to speak about their experiences and emphasise the positive effect the visits have on their children. Hearing these comments may help the young inmate to gradually overcome her reluctance, which is what the Relais has found commonly occurs.

The pilot programme

Blanco first began working with prisoners' children in 1972, in a centre for babies and toddlers in Paris called *La Maison de l'Abandon* (literally, the House of Abandonment). This centre was part of the *Aide Sociale à l'Enfance et à la Famille* or A.S.E., the statutory child and family support body under the Ministry of Health, Social and Urban Affairs, which is currently one of the Relais' most important partners. Previously, Blanco had studied at the *Ecole Supérieure des Educateurs d'Enfants*, a college for childhood educators in 1962. She went on to work in early childhood development, caring for handicapped children and war orphans.

She later collaborated with the late psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto in a drop-in centre staffed by professionals who counselled mothers and children. She recalls caring for two young Laotians there, who

had witnessed the arrest of both parents. They had grown anorexic and lethargic, walled up in silence. 'Nothing had been explained to them,' says Blanco. 'They were never told that their parents had done something wrong, nor that they hadn't been abandoned. Above all, no one had told them that they were still loved.' As a result of her experience at the centre, Blanco was well-versed in Dolto's theory of honesty being a key factor when dealing with children. Dolto believed that even infants perceive and benefit from verbal explanations. Here is what Dolto told a group of inmates at Fleury-Mérogis prison:

> 'You should talk to babies about everything, for they need this to become human beings. Things that are verbalised become humanised. It's what goes unsaid that is bad, even if we believe that pain is avoided by not verbalising things. If we don't tell a child something, it means we have to hide it, that it's not good. A child's intelligence is extraordinary. I'm not talking about the capacity to reason logically, which develops as the child grows older, but the intelligence of the human relationship. He has this from the moment he is born.'[2]

Over the next 10 years, during which time she ran a training centre for early childhood professionals, Blanco gradually developed a strategy for rekindling the child-parent bond all too often shattered by incarceration.

> 'I discovered an area devoid of any kind of social action. On the one hand, justice dealt with the parent by imprisoning him or her. On the other hand, the child was placed in the care of an institution. But it never dawned on anyone that there should be a correlation between the two institutions, given that children are meant to be near their parents.'

In July 1985, after receiving Ministry of Justice backing and small grants from the *Fondation de France* and an association called *Delta 7*, Blanco conducted a pilot programme in the women's wing of Fleury-Mérogis prison on maintaining the child-parent bond. Fleury-Mérogis, a *maison d'arrêt*, was the first establishment to agree to the Relais pilot project, and it was – and still is – the largest women's prison in France. Two years earlier, the then Justice Minister, Robert Badinter, had ushered in a series of changes within the penitentiary system. Inmates were permitted to wear civilian clothes, rent television sets in their cells, and subscribe to magazines and newspapers; while discussions on building waiting facilities outside prisons were gradually taking place.

When Blanco first contacted Fleury-Mérogis in 1985 concerning the pilot programme, a prison-run project focusing on conditions of the nursery was already underway. Francis Blondiau, then director of this women's prison, recalls,

> 'For some time, we had seen that we couldn't do everything ourselves. I received a call from Marie-France Blanco, who wanted to meet with me. She explained her ideas to me and from then on, I began to see the way forward more clearly. I saw a number of extraordinary things happen that encouraged me to back the Relais programme.'

Blondiau gradually became aware that better management of prisoners' lives resulted in improved working conditions for staff, as it fostered an atmosphere that was calmer, more relaxed. 'When I was asked if similar activities could be expanded and introduced in the men's prison, I was enthusiastically in favour of it,' he says.

Blanco first had to test the waters in terms of the women inmates' attitudes, however. As an expert in early childhood, she knew what children required for development – but Blanco needed to tap into the mothers' needs. Did these women indeed feel an acute need to maintain close ties with their children? Relais psychologist Anne-Edith Houel, with the help of a field-worker, deposited a one-page questionnaire in the 250 cells of the women's wing, asking them how they felt about rekindling relationships with their children. They received 60 responses, which Blanco interpreted as a success, given the novel character of the initiative, the rate of illiteracy, and the apathy which is often characteristic of inmates. Above all, the questionnaire sparked dialogue.

> 'Mothers showed us mail they had received from their children, and expressed sadness that they would not be present for their son's first day at kindergarten or their daughter's first bra,'

recalls Blanco. Although her initial intention was to talk to mothers about child development, she found that it was the women themselves who needed to speak:

> 'The women's greatest need was to be listened to and assisted in seeing their children again. We quickly had to reorient the project. Mothers had endless questions, and their questions were nearly identical to the children's – everything revolved around daily life.'

Many of the mothers were concerned about the financial welfare of their children, as no budgetary line item exists to ensure that the children of imprisoned parents receive allocations or benefits. Prisoners can work under two basic labour schemes. First, they can be employed by the prison's general services for such jobs as custodial work or kitchen service. They earn approximately USD 85 a month, follow certain deductions, such as those made for rent arrears or debts incurred prior to imprisonment. Secondly, inmates can work inside the prison for private companies; monthly net salaries can reach USD 300 (deductions are higher for private employees). Inmates also receive social security benefits, either because they were part of the general system prior to their arrest (they continue to be entitled to benefits) or as a result of their prison work. Dependents of those inmates receiving social security are entitled to benefits as well, although this is far from being common knowledge among inmates, according to Blanco.

An evaluation of the pilot project was made in October 1985. After failing to secure financial backing from judicial authorities, Blanco received support from her husband, Elie Blanco, who decided to finance the first six months of the project. During these first six months in the prisons of Fleury-Mérogis and Versailles (where the Relais launched a similar programme at the beginning of 1986), it became clear that mothers needed a very specific type of support. Meanwhile, outside the prisons, children expressed despair over their parents' absence. These observations convinced the Relais to work on two parallel fronts: inside with the parents and outside with the children, thus creating a bridge spanning two worlds. 'No one had had this idea before,' says Blanco.

The Relais became an official association in the winter of 1986, backed by the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the then existing *Délégation à la Condition Féminine* (Delegation on the Condition of Women), the *Etat aux Droits de l'Homme* (State Secretariat for Human Rights), *Delta 7*, and the *Fondation de France*.

A burgeoning network

Though the Relais only celebrates its 10th anniversary in 1996, the times of its first activities in the prisons of Fleury-Mérogis seem long gone. During the 1990s, the Relais helped create a number of local associations spanning the whole country. The first of these was the Relais Enfants-Parents/Haute Normandie followed by the Relais Enfants-Parents/Val de Loire, both inaugurated in 1992. In 1994, the different local associations decided to create an umbrella body,

the *Fédération Relais Enfants-Parents* (hereafter called 'the Federation') chiefly for administrative purposes. Not only does the Federation provide a common legal framework, but as a national administrative body it is also entitled to certain state subsidies to which local associations are not entitled.

The Federation currently comprises 11 local Relais Enfants-Parents: Relais Enfants-Parents/Ile-de-France, Relais Enfants-Parents/Haute Normandie, Relais Enfants-Parents/Bourgogne, Relais Enfants-Parents/Grand Ouest, Relais Enfants-Parents/Val de Loire, Relais Enfants-Parents/Languedoc-Roussillon, Relais Enfants-Parents/Alpes-Provence-Côte d'Azur, Relais Enfants-Parents/Rhône-Alpes, Relais Enfants-Parents/Midi-Pyrénées, Relais Enfants-Parents/Nantes and Relais Enfants-Parents/Saint Etienne (hereafter the local Relais are referred to as the 'Relais' and the region). How has this network of local associations actually developed?

> 'We receive calls from people who have seen a press clipping and want to know if a Relais Enfants-Parents exists in their city,' explains Bouregba, who is director of the Federation and responsible for training. 'We sometimes put them in contact with other people we know there or who have been in touch with us. We often act as a catalyst.'

The Federation coordinates the national network and organises quarterly meetings to exchange experiences between the different local associations. Although each local Relais functions as an independent association, the Federation provides training for volunteers and logistical support to help establish local associations, including help in writing statutes and assistance in applying for subsidies

The local Relais Enfants-Parents, falling under the aegis of the Federation, adhere to the charter of the original Relais that outlines its methodological and operational principles. Yet, each local Relais Enfants-Parents is tailored to its local context and develops its own innovations. The Relais Val de Loire, for example, has created a lending library for toys – a *ludothèque* – situated on its own premises, supported by Orléans city council. Children can borrow toys before and after prison visits. The *ludothèque* is also open to children who are residents of the area to avoid any stigma attached to a centre 'for prisoners' children'.

The total budget of all Relais Enfants-Parents associations come to USD 1 million. Yet, there are stark differences in the size of budgets between the local associations. The budget for the Relais is USD

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540,000, compared to that of the Relais Midi-Pyrénées, which is USD 50,000. The Relais network receives approximately one quarter of its funding from judicial and penitentiary bodies affiliated to the Ministry of Justice and one quarter from different statutory bodies responsible for work in areas ranging from crime prevention to community development. The rest of the funding comes from the Ministry of Social Affairs, the *Conseils Généraux*, the *Fond d'Action Social* and private donations in by and large equal parts.

The Relais network currently has regular programmes in 25 prisons throughout France: 10 women's prisons and 15 men's. In another 18 prisons it intervenes on an occasional basis. The network's total staff includes 46 psychologists and educators, supported by over 200 volunteers who accompany the children on visits. The Relais has a large staff compared to the other local associations, since Ile-de-France counts for one third of France's total prison population of 57,638 (1 June 1995). It is supported by 52 volunteers and has a staff of 10, including three psychologists, four educators, two administrative personnel, and one person who is responsible for obtaining visit permits and organising the logistics of children's visits to parents.

Given its higher number of staff members, the Relais is also able to accompany children to prisons outside those in which it runs regular activities. These visits sometimes involve trips to areas outside Ile-de-France, for example, if a parent is detained elsewhere while the child lives in Ile-de-France. In 1995, the Relais accompanied more than 175 children on over 900 visits. In total, the Relais network accompanied children on over 4,000 visits in 1995.[1] The visits form a part of the activities carried out inside the prisons, which also include working with the parents, organising workshops, and running play areas. Together, activities inside the prisons constitute over 65 per cent of the Relais' total work.

The staff of a local Relais is by and large similar to that of the Relais in professional composition, although smaller in scale ranging from two to eight professionals and 10 to 45 volunteers. Relais associations adopt a community approach to internal organisation, in that tasks are shared and everyone pitches in. This can give a semblance of disorder to the untrained eye, but in reality, it allows everyone to remain abreast of what is going on, which is key, given the relatively limited number of staff handling a burgeoning workload.

One of the Relais Enfants-Parents' working principles is to organise visits to prisons **only** upon request, whether it comes from the

parent, child, family member, doctor, foster family or social worker. Judges occasionally ask a Relais Enfants-Parents to act as a mediator. Although a Relais Enfants-Parents is generally solicited to act as an intermediary when a situation involves conflict, approximately four per cent of visits entail straightforward procedures in which the only conflict is a lack of logistical means in accompanying children on prison visits. The Relais Enfants-Parents then steps in and provides transportation. Most of the newer prisons for example, are not accessible by public transportation. Families must walk, drive or take a taxi. Families who go to Joux-la-Ville prison in Burgundy, for example, can spend up to USD 50 per visit if they have to hire a taxi, as the prison is situated far from the train station.

According to the French Penal Procedure Code, children aged 13 and younger must be accompanied by an adult on prison visits. Yet family members frequently cannot or do not want to drive or accompany children. Volunteers therefore step in to facilitate parent-child contact by picking up children at institutions or their homes, driving them to the prisons, accompanying them through searches and security checks, discreetly waiting to see how the visit unfolds, then returning the child to his or her home. In the more difficult cases, such as when a father has slain the mother, a psychologist, rather than a volunteer, accompanies the child, at least during the preliminary stages. 'Some situations are so complex, the child has gone through so much, that we have to initiate the process with a real professional, at least to evaluate what is going on,' says Blanco.

For sentenced inmates, it is the prison director who grants permission for visits; for inmates on remand, it is the judge who does so. It is thus generally easier to obtain a permit for a sentenced prisoner than for one on remand. Families can ask the judge or the prison director for visiting permits themselves, but the matter tends to be dealt with more quickly when the Relais Enfants-Parents handle it. 'As the judges are familiar with our working principles, they give a speedier answer,' explains Bouregba. The Relais can obtain a visiting permit within a week, sometimes the very same day, and can request it by fax. If the request for a visit comes from inmates, the Relais fills out a form with the inmates, specifying their name, prison and status (sentenced or on remand); the children's names, whether they reside in an institution or with a family, address, information on the socio-educational services concerned and custody rights. Two questions are also asked, using discretion: do the children know that their parents are incarcerated? If so, do they know why? The Relais then gets in touch with the caregiver of the child and relays the request to the tribunal.

If the child's other parent or caregiver refuses the visit, the Relais returns to the inmate and informs him or her accordingly. Together, the Relais and the inmate revise the situation, probing for ways to expedite the visit. Are the parents divorced? If so, were parental rights granted as part of the divorce? If this is the case, a letter is written to the *juge des affaires de famille*.

> 'In all of these steps, the inmate must be the one to actively make the requests,' Blanco points out. 'That way, he or she is reinforced in the role of parent, and can say to the child: "I did everything I could to try and see you, but Mummy/Daddy doesn't want it to happen right now."'

Notes and references

1. Bouregba, Alain 'De la rupture au maintien des liens', In: *Transitions 31: Enfants-Parents-Lieux*, 1991, Paris: Association pour l'Etude et la Promotion des Structures Intermédiaires.

2. Odile Dormoy, 'Une journée particulière à Fleury-Mérogis: La visite de Françoise Dolto à la Maison d'Arrêt des Femmes de Fleury-Mérogis le 26 mars 1987', *ibid.*

3. A figure based on *Fédération Relais Enfants-Parents* estimates. Some local Relais do not keep records on the number of visits.

Chapter 2

The resistance factor

According to Article 3(b) of the Federation's charter, 'When a Relais team intervenes inside the prison, it is acting to facilitate the parental role, and must never forget that it is addressing responsible parents above all, not inmates.' In difficult cases, the Relais first works with parents inside the prisons to prepare them for contact with their children. With the goal of improving children's emotional life and positively impacting their capacity to love – now as children and later as adults – the most important psychotherapeutic work is first done with the incarcerated parents. In prison, parental authority becomes painfully unreal and decisions regarding children are often made without consulting the parent. The Relais tries to help these individuals feel like mothers or fathers again, despite their wounded self-esteem and sense of failure. Bouregba writes,

> It is a question of isolating the role of parent from the other roles which incarceration imposes. The way in which the parent deals with separation, either by withdrawing into an imaginary world or by reinforcing it through denial, conditions the child's reactions. It is as if the child naturally adjusts his or her behaviour according to the parent's behaviour.[1]

It is often very difficult psychologically for a parent to maintain the bond with his or her children. The fear of having abandoned a child or having been a 'bad' parent leads to guilt and shame, heightened by the fact that the inmate is likely to have been the child of parents who had neglected or abandoned him or her. This guilt spreads and ravages the individual and, when coupled with an identity shattered by incarceration, often leads to regression; the parent is confronted by shame and feelings of inferiority. Failure in terms of being a 'good' parent sometimes heightens guilt to the point where self-esteem is lastingly impaired.

> From then on the parental role is exercised in a morbid universe of error. Guilt spreads and, given the intrinsically narcissistic nature of the parent-child bond, shame does so as well – the shame of having abandoned one's child, a shame cloaked in silence or lies, which pushes one away from the child and ultimately breaks the bond.[2]

In society's eyes, being a mother in prison is synonymous with being a bad mother; being a father in prison is less degrading. 'I've abandoned my child,' many imprisoned mothers say, fearing that they have hindered the development of their children. Paradoxically, these anxieties may lead to the restoration of identity and self-esteem in certain cases: if a mother anticipates the suffering of the child she is separated from, it boosts her feelings of self-worth as being essential to the child's well-being, thus reinforcing the parental role. Counselling that focuses on these feelings, reinforces them. The mother embraces these positive feelings to ease the feelings of inferiority. This need for expiation is more pronounced in mothers than in fathers.

Reaching a stage where dialogue flows is not always easy, however. The hostility of imprisoned parents, particularly mothers, is often projected onto the external world when self-reproach becomes too painful to bear. As a result, attempts to influence the inmate are often rebuffed, even those which aim to salvage the parent-child relationship. Ultimately, the aggression is targeted at the child, the silent observer whose gaze stirs fears of recrimination and loss of respect as the mother feels that her child witnesses her deficiencies. Because of this, as previously mentioned, many mothers are afraid of telling their children about their incarceration and prefer to lie.

The mother avoids seeing others and being seen; any contact with reality risks pouring salt into the wounds. She lives in a state of denial that restricts the relationship, sometimes to the point of breaking the bond with her child. Bouregba gives his interpretation,

> 'I think that these mothers always tell their children the truth: but it is a truth which belongs to them, and not an absolute truth. A lie is the consequence of shame. There is always a grain of truth in lies that are told as a result of wounded identity and self-esteem. When a mother says that she is in the hospital, this is partly because it's true – she is hurting. The child grabs onto this point of intercession between the lie and the reality. By telling a lie, a parent reveals more than if she had told him or her the truth. The child worries; the mother hurts.'

Blanco cites an example of such a situation:

> 'In one case, a four year old girl was told her father was in the hospital. She was finally brought to the prison. "Daddy ate too much salt, his eyes are too big for his stomach, and when that happens, we're punished. That's why he's in prison." The child detects what's going on. What the parent wishes to conceal by the lie is expressed all the more loudly. It is important that children be able to tell the parent what they understand. Here's where the role of a third party comes in – to have a dialogue with the child, then turn to the parent and say, "Here's what your child wants to tell you." Conversely, parents are incapable of saying things to the child. They fear hearing themselves pronounce certain words, so we intervene to bring the words to those who are destined to hear them.'

Relais' workers observe that fathers experience emotional patterns similar to those a mother experiences, but that their bad conscience tends to take on other forms, usually, violent indignation. Instead of the response, 'I have abandoned my child,' commonly found in mothers, the fathers' response is 'They are depriving me of my child.' Paternalism is thus defined by what is missing. If dialogue is possible, the workers try to help the inmate see his parental role in a different light – not in terms of what is missing, but instead in terms of what he is transmitting. What will he hand down to his child? He responds to the thought of delinquency with fear. Through counselling, the Relais targets this fear, and tries to reorient his paternal role: 'We must tell him – it's not an easy thing to say, but we must try to anyway – that there's no sense in trying to predict what will happen. He has to help the child question his situation, he has to speak to the child,' writes Bouregba.' 'This is the difficult task of being a father in prison.' He sums up the Relais' approach in this way:

> 'How can we reformulate the role of father? How can we help the mother soften the blow to her identity and self-esteem that interferes with her relationship with her child? How can we facilitate the role of the parent who is separated from his child by distance? As a psychologist, I answer that I do not know. If there is anything we can do, it may be to offer ... opportunities for an exchange during which seemingly impossible situations can find new meaning and, at times, be overcome. It is truly a significant evolution when we witness a phenomenon that Spinoza – considered by many to have been a precursor of psychoanalysis – would

describe in the following way: "Passions cease to exist as soon as a clear and distinct idea is formulated around them." What we do, although this is somewhat difficult to describe, is to help the parent formulate clear and distinct ideas of his passions. For no matter what is commonly heard, an inmate continues to be the parent of his children. He is responsible for the separation caused by imprisonment, he is responsible for his act with respect to the law, but his responsibility towards his children is never to be put into question, except in cases of incest or child abuse.'[4]

Resistance of the child and caregiver family

The resistance of the child and caregiver family towards the imprisoned parent occurs not only in extreme cases of violence, such as when a child is 'given' to the victim's family as compensation; it can occur in any family. The rancour and resentment of both the child and the family builds up, and the absent parent is targeted as the source of all ills. If a child watches too much television and neglects his homework, or talks back, or stays out too much, it is because the parent is in prison. The caregivers may hesitate over taking the child to visit the parent, which leads to a situation in which it is easy to renounce maintaining the bond with the parent.

The decision not to visit the parent often comforts the child initially. This is a short-term vision, however. The idealised version of a child as a small bundle of affection and love is simplistic; the reality of a child's attitude towards a parent is far more complex. 'Children sometimes adapt relatively easily to a parent's absence,' says Bouregba. '"Oh it was great when daddy wasn't here. I could watch television whenever I wanted, I got to sleep with Mummy. I wish he were back in prison." This must be taken into consideration when talking with the child.'

In addition, a child's resistance often stems from the way a family couches language surrounding parental visits, thus shaping the child's responses. 'Are you sure you want to go and see daddy?' a grandmother asks. The child says no to gain favour, and experiences guilt as a result. The child who does not want to go really needs an opportunity to talk about it, lest he risk feeling he has 'murdered' the parent, which can have serious repercussions.

Persuading the caregivers

The Relais won't take no for an answer: given the importance of the family context, the Relais carries out a virtual lobbying campaign

with the caregivers if they refuse to permit the child to visit the imprisoned parent. The degree of resistance is often contingent upon two factors: the nature of the caregiver's relationship with the inmate prior to arrest and whether the imprisoned parent's offence is deemed 'chronic' or 'dangerous', particularly in cases involving incest and child abuse.

Suzanne Roger, who handles operations surrounding prison visits for Ile-de-France relates a situation she is currently dealing with: a maternal grandmother granted custody of her grandchild while her daughter is serving sentence upon sentence for drug related offences, is refusing to agree to a visit. The grandmother's relationship with her daughter was poor prior to arrest, and the nature of the offence is 'chronic' – the resistance factor is thus high.

In cases of resistance, the Relais first contacts the family concerned by sending letters requesting that they get in touch with the association. As the majority of cases fail to respond, a card is then sent, bearing a simple message: 'Please contact the Relais. It concerns your child.' The vague nature of the message often triggers concern and induces some families to telephone, which is a much more effective means of contact. But in the majority of cases the Relais initiates the call. In addition, the Relais sends them articles, press clippings, and relevant information to show the legitimacy of its goals in maintaining the parent-child bond, the repercussions of separation and so on. If the family refuses to yield, the Relais writes to the inmate concerned and suggests he or she contact a *juge des enfants* or *juge des affaires famille*. According to the Relais, all but five per cent of families are eventually persuaded to permit the visit to take place.

Notes and References

1. Bouregba, Alain (1991), 'De la rupture au maintien des liens.' In: *Transitions 31: Enfants-Parents-Lieux*, 1991, ASEPSI, Paris.

2. Bouregba, Alain (1992), 'Parents Détenus, Enfants Séparés: De la rupture au maintien des liens.' In: *Enfants, Parents, Prison, Cahier 4*, Fondation de France, Paris.

3. *ibid.*

4. *ibid.*

Chapter 3

The primary tools

The first of the Relais' primary tools is the craft workshops in which the mother creates a present for her child. The present becomes a virtual bridge spanning the walls of the prison and a wellspring of potential. First, the gift serves as a symbolic link between the mother and child. Young children need tangible proof of love; abstract concepts only have an impact later in life. When the child receives the gift, he or she receives a message: 'Mummy is thinking of you. She may not be with you all the time, but you are always on her mind, and she loves you.' Blanco gives an example of how a gift can serve as a link:

> 'Recently, a little girl telephoned me, overjoyed at the gift she had just received from her mother, a red and black dog as long as a baguette of bread. "My dog told me that Mummy has not forgotten me and that she will be coming home soon," she said. When I asked her if she had a message for her mother, she answered: "Tell her I got the little dog and I know she loves me."'

Second, the act of creating an object for the child reinforces the inmate's role as a parent. When a woman attends a workshop session, she comes as a mother, not as a detainee. On average, each woman attends workshops once in two weeks where they make gifts for their children. In some prisons, such as in Fleury-Mérogis, demand is so high that four sessions are organised simultaneously. A typical workshop takes place in a nondescript room within the prison. At Fleury-Mérogis, the room is spacious, with off-white walls lined with drawings done by the women – silhouettes of women in reflective poses, a caged bird, a child's hand print – hanging between narrow windows. Mothers hear about the Relais from the prison's socio-educational services or by word of mouth. Attendance varies from 20 women one day to three the following session. After signing up, they come to make the gifts and to talk with Relais workers and the other mothers.

The fact that the prison recognises their status as mothers tends to boost the women's self-esteem: one woman at Fleury-Mérogis invented a child to qualify for the sessions. In addition, workshops provide an excellent forum for conveying practical information on child development and maintaining the child-parent bond, as the mothers can enquire about prison visits for their children. There are always two Relais staff members present, one to lead the women in the craft activities, another to listen and observe. Blanco gives some examples of how the workshops serve as a forum for exchanging ideas on child development:

> 'Women worry about the development of their children, and the Relais tries to shed some perspective on the issue. One mother was distressed by the fact that her 20 month old child wasn't toilet trained yet. We emphasised that norms for child development have been established, but that perhaps her child was picking up on some of the difficulties that she, the mother, was going through. The child probably excels at other activities – is walking well, or climbing stairs – but maybe doesn't want to be toilet trained because he wants someone to take care of him, to change his diapers: this will gradually change. Independently, we follow up on these kinds of problems by speaking with caregiver families and enquiring about the child's progress.
>
> Another mother was concerned by the fact that her three year old pulls away from her during visits. We explained that children three to four years in age are trying to be autonomous, and that this is a natural stage of development. We suggested that the child be given her own little chair during visits. The parents need to reinforce their children's behaviour, not be offended by it.
>
> We also emphasise that the parents write to their children, no matter what age they are. Many parents do not write to young children who haven't yet learned to read. We explain that letters will be read aloud to young children, permitting them to form mental images of their own. We encourage mothers to tap into memories which they and their children share – recalling a song they sang together or a favourite bedtime story.'

Inmates see the Relais as independent of the prison authorities. This, coupled with its regular presence, inspires confidence that encourages inmates to open up and discuss their situation, emotions and fears. 'Our responsibility is to be here regularly, in the same room, at the same hours, to create landmarks in the prisoners' frozen

sense of time,' says Blanco. During the workshops while talking, she is coming up with ideas for gifts, fashioning a few lifeless squares of fabric (donated by manufacturers, stores and others) into plush baby booties, heart-shaped pillows, a toy elephant or a traditional *djellabah*. 'We are here to listen, and there is always the notion of an exchange, whether it be information, laughter, encouragement or tears.' The sessions can also help a mother feel a sense of purpose and to mentally prepare for her release, especially in terms of what to expect with her child. Here is one account of Kathy, who has served a long sentence at a *maison centrale* and regularly attends the workshop:

> 'The Relais made me feel like living and fighting again. Thanks to the workshops, I've learned to relax. When we talk about our children, we forget our worries, we know that returning home will be difficult. We have been told that when a father or mother is absent for a long period of time, the child can regress, become aggressive. We try to prepare ourselves for this.'

Experience reveals that women with timid voices who remain withdrawn and inhibited during the workshops are often those serving sentences for child abuse or complicity to incest or rape. One young inmate at Fleury-Mérogis, eight months pregnant, remained isolated from the rest of the women and did not utter a word as she chose some fabric for baby booties. She was to be transferred to Fresnes prison the following day, in preparation for delivery. Unbeknownst to her, her baby was to be taken from her following the birth because she had battered her first child to death. Blanco explains that:

> 'These mothers deserve special attention. After one year attending the workshops they are often a little better, as if learning how to walk again after a long illness. The things they make for their children are less unsightly and rigid. It's as if the desire to re-create the bond with the child has resurfaced. In all cases, I really believe in the value of objects, in the transitional symbol that bears a message.'

The workshops also have an indirect impact on others. The gift created serves as an ideal pretext for contacting a caregiver family who is resisting a child's visit to the prison. The Relais, which customarily mails the gift with the brief message 'From Mummy', can instead personally deliver the package and take advantage of this opportunity to enquire about the child's physical and emotional health. Young children separated from their parents often display a range of symptoms, from skin rashes and frequent ear infections to

bed-wetting, depression, lack of concentration and poor school achievement. By observing the child and discussing these problems, the Relais will try to win the caregivers' confidence, listen to their concerns, assess the situation and gradually broach the subject of the parent-child bond.

The Relais also brings raw materials which the fathers can use to create gifts but, in contrast to the women's sessions, the work is done in the individual cells. An exception is the Relais Haute-Normandie, which holds workshops for fathers similar to those for mothers. According to Blanco, men find it more difficult to be fathers in prison than women to be mothers. On top of this, many marriages and relationships do not withstand the strain of imprisonment. Mothers outside must permit the fathers in prison to be fathers, and see their children. An estimated 50 per cent of fathers who are separated from their children lose all contact with them after two years of incarceration.[1]

The Relais tries to rekindle the father-child bond by holding *permanences éducatives*, bi-monthly counselling sessions open to fathers who wish to drop by to talk. During these sessions, the men discuss everything from new jobs on the horizon to legal snags delaying a child's prison visit. When women seek help and guidance from the Relais, they speak of their children's need for them; men tend to talk about the need they feel for their children. 'This contradiction is not strange – women are born mothers, but men become fathers,' says Blanco. 'And the child that the prisoner needs is precisely the agent of this paternal growth.' Maintaining the father-child bond is more difficult than maintaining the mother-child bond, Relais workers observe, since the former must have existed in the first place. A parental image of oneself is also essential, and many fathers are lacking this image.

To address this, the Relais helps fathers do very practical things. They are given techniques to write letters or information on their child's stage of development. Fathers who haven't seen their children for more than a year are usually incapable of giving the child's height or weight. The Relais tries to bring the child's daily existence back to life through discussion about his or her favourite books and television shows, children's clothes and toys. 'Giving the fathers a sense of their children's daily routine empowers them and they start to talk amongst themselves about their children,' says Blanco. She cites some examples:

> 'We had to help a father to understand why a telephone call with his son was so short. We had to make him recognise that it was only a phone call, and not enough to revive their

> relationship. We always have to put things into perspective to help fathers cope. One father complained that his four year old son no longer wanted to sit on his lap during visits. I explained that this was a normal development, as a four year old is trying to be independent and needs to take some distance. It is also important to help fathers understand that with children, feelings do not always go both ways. Children need to receive love, they do not always need to give it.'

The Relais is increasingly approached by fathers who want to see their children. Resistance to maintaining the father-child bond is more tenacious, however. It is commonly held that children need their mothers, but the importance of the link with the fathers is less clearly defined for some. Judges recognise a mother's right to maintain the relationship with the child more readily than a father's, although this is gradually changing. The vital role a father plays in the child's development has gained recognition, in particular under the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's influence.[2] In a significant move, the most recently founded local association – in Toulouse – launched by a child development psychologist will be the first to be specifically created around a men's prison. To expand the Relais' action in men's prisons – in addition to the greater task of persuading judges, prison directors and social workers to facilitate the link – would require 'an army of volunteers', according to Blanco, given the vastly greater number of male inmates.

The child's time

Articles D403 and D412 of the French Penal Code Procedure detail the powers of the prison director and the conditions for prison visits. Conditions are also highly contingent upon the internal regulations of the prison. Prisoners on remand usually are permitted half-hour to one hour visits three times a week; sentenced prisoners in a *maison d'arrêt* are allowed once weekly hour-long visit on weekends; those in a *maison centrale* are permitted one to four hour visits on Saturdays and Sundays. Many children come with relatives to the *parloirs de famille* to visit their parents. There are no regulations in the above mentioned articles pertaining to the specific conditions necessary for receiving a child who comes to see his or her parent. Although voice phones in visiting areas were eliminated by Justice Minister Badinter in 1983, there are stipulations in some prisons that regulate the amount of physical contact between the child and the parent in the *parloirs de famille*. Within a *parloir de famille* at the *maison d'arrêt* at Fresnes, for example, children are allowed to kiss the parent once when they arrive and once as they leave the two square metre cubicle.

Relais volunteers accompany children aged from infancy to 18 years, and sometimes older such as in the case of handicapped children, on prison visits. Beyond the main goal of bringing the child and parent together, the aim of the visits is threefold. First, the volunteers provide emotional stability for the children. Their role is essential, as they are the people who are with the children before and immediately after the visits. Much of the Relais' key work involves dialogue with the children during trips to and from the prisons. Beforehand, the volunteer can talk with the children about their feelings towards the parent, and what the child wishes to say to the parent. Afterwards, the volunteer helps the children come to grips with the experience of the visit. In most cases, conflicts such as resistance are an obstacle to the visit, and without the volunteers' involvement, the children would not be likely to visit their parents.

Second, a visit accompanied by a volunteer permits the children more physical space and liberty. The visits usually take place in the much larger *parloir d'avocat* as opposed to the regular *parloir de famille*, and the children are allowed to express as much affection as they desire. Lastly, those visits grant the child more psychological space *vis à vis* the parent. Suzanne Roger explains:

> 'In general, during visits a child is taken to the prison with one of his or her parents to see the other parent. When the child comes out of the *parloir*, he or she might feel very frustrated. The mother and the father had a lot to speak about between themselves. If we take the child, it is solely the child's time. And, on average, this means a full hour. It could be a half-hour, but at Bois d'Arcy (a *maison d'arrêt* for men) we can sometimes stay for three hours. I have this one child in mind who has stayed for three hours at times and the relationship with his father is excellent. The son brings his homework, they go over an English lesson. Sometimes a mother visits the inmate first, and then the Relais volunteer accompanies the child in. The parents talk about their adult affairs, and when they have finished the child can talk about his grades, or a new project. Whatever the subject, it is the child's time.'

In general, a volunteer picks up the child at the caregiver's home or the institution, then accompanies the child to the prison. Distance determines both the frequency of the visit and the means of transportation. Ninety-five per cent of visits involve volunteers driving the children; the frequency ranges from every two weeks to every six weeks. Occasionally, a caregiver may bring the child to the prison but does not wish to see the inmate, and the volunteer brings the child in. Long waiting periods in front of foreboding doors are common experiences for prison visits, followed by the intimidating

moment of going through electronic doors, when any metal object in a pocket triggers an alarm. Next comes the interminable turning of keys in locks and the slamming of doors – sounds which resound to the core.

The first few visits often take place in silence and hostility is frequently palpable. 'The temptation is there not to continue the visits,' says Blanco. 'But if you persist, as time goes by, the parent and child discover that their aggression was shielding the need they have for one another, the love they are afraid to show.' Visits often liberate children in many ways. The volunteer gradually allows the children to free themselves from the image they had formed in their minds and from the influence of the caregivers, who often turn the parent into a diabolical figure.

Children often feel responsible for their parents' incarceration. When parents explain to their children that they are in prison and that they are the only ones responsible for this, the children can start to find a sense of inner peace and to reconstruct their interior world. With each visit, emotional stability is gradually restored and the bond revived. Here is the account of Patricia, who is a drug addict.

> 'The first few visits with my little boy were very difficult. He had lost confidence, he didn't know me and was scared. I thought he hated me. I didn't know how to handle the situation. I longed for him to come and sit on my lap, to kiss him, but I was afraid he would refuse. He once hit the wall with all his strength – he wanted to leave right away. During the third visit, he huddled in a corner and stayed there lifeless, completely immobile. So I decided to talk to the Relais. I wondered whether I wasn't doing my son more harm than good, and whether I should ask them to stop bringing him to see me. We talked about the situation and they persuaded me otherwise. Today is Martin's sixth birthday. He climbs on my lap and hugs me. Confidence is gradually returning. My arrest was a deep shock to him. I betrayed him. He carried the weight of my own stupidity. I had to talk with him, to explain everything. It was the least I could do. During our last visit, I asked Martin if he was angry with me. "Yes, because I love you," he responded, adding, "it's my fault that you are here because I should have told you to stop (taking drugs)."'

The child often shows fear in approaching the parent. Some parents are impatient and seek instant emotional gratification. They want to hug and kiss their son or daughter, but the child sometimes refuses and may even start to scream. The Relais stresses to the parent the need to wait until the child reaches out towards him or her. In turn,

the child needs assistance in approaching the parent. The Relais tries to help by finding ways of renewing contact. Blanco explains:

> 'We use little games to literally help the children approach their parents, such as hiding objects closer and closer to the parents, or asking the parents to sing songs the children used to hear when they were little. A common memory is reawakened and a relationship springs back to life. This can take two to three visits. It is not easy. For many of these children, separation has been very violent. Mothers who are drug addicts are not easy mothers. A father who has killed the mother is frightening for the child. The parents have to make an effort to be a partner. It is also up to the parents to respect their children's decision to visit them, and allow them to gradually come closer.'

Children who are compelled to live by timetables of separations and meetings which they have not chosen may refuse to maintain contact with their parents. The Relais listens to their decisions and respects them. The Relais workers understand that children between the ages of six and eight often have formed strong opinions about the incarcerated parent, as they are generally acquiring a sense of morality at this age. What's more, young children often reject the bond with the real parents to protect the image they have forged within themselves of ideal parents. Bouregba explains that,

> 'At around five years of age children tend to invent a family for themselves based upon what they miss in their real family, to the point of hating their real parents. The Relais has an important role to play in dealing with this relationship that is rejected in reality and desired in dreams.'

The Relais stresses the importance of the child making at least one visit, in order to shatter any preconceived stereotypes of the parent in prison. Children sometimes expect to see their parents dressed in striped uniforms, complete with ball and chain. In addition, a true separation is often not initiated until a prison visit takes place. Here is one account in which this was found to be the case:

> Two children, aged eight and twelve, are being raised in a foster home because their father was imprisoned seven years earlier for killing their mother. The younger boy was in his mother's arms at the time of the murder. To avoid subjecting the children to a traumatic experience, the child protection service wanted to avoid any encounter with the father, who was urgently seeking to see the children. Going against the wishes of the social services and of the children themselves, a

judge ordered that a meeting take place and asked the Relais to mediate. Weekly, hourly sessions were organised for a duration of six weeks, during which time the children would be able to express their aggression through games, verbal exchanges and drawings. 'In any case, when we see him, it'll just be to say "Goodbye, asshole!"' said one of the children.

When they met their father for the first time, the children saw him in tears, exactly the opposite of what they had imagined, and they shunned him physically and emotionally. But the encounter was essential, according to the accompanying psychologist. Only then could the bond with the father make any sense at all to the children; it was only then that they grasped what it was and were thus capable of initiating a separation.

A child's resistance may also be linked to the prison setting itself. Some visiting rooms, such as those at the *maison d'arrêt* at Fresnes, are cold, sterile and unpleasant, and are a deterrent for children. The Relais has made an effort to adapt the *parloirs d'avocat* to surroundings more suitable for children. Bars are covered with wooden planks, for example, and the cubicles painted with bright colours. Such refurbishment is often done with the help of private or corporate donors.

One of the most dramatic changes the Relais has introduced within the prisons constitutes its third tool: the *espaces enfants*, or play areas, where imprisoned parents can spend time with their children. The play areas vary in size and structure. Some of them, such as in Fleury-Mérogis, are enclosed rooms open during specific hours to children accompanied by a Relais representative or by other social workers. One person must accompany each child or each group of siblings, and children must be 13 or under, except if one of a group of siblings is over that age. Most of the play areas, however, are open to all children visiting their parents, whether or not accompanied by Relais staff or social workers. This type of play area functions like a play corner within the regular *parloir de famille* and, in addition to serving regular weekend visits, it is used by Relais staff and social workers for visits during the week. Each play area costs approximately USD 5,400 to build; private firms occasionally finance the construction, such as for the play areas at Fleury-Mérogis, at the men's *centre de détention* at Val de Reuil, or the women's *centre de détention* at Joux-la-Ville.

There are currently 17 *espaces enfants* in prisons throughout France, nine of which are run in Ile-de-France. In 1994, 1,440 children used the play areas accompanied by Relais workers. For the most part, the play areas function on weekends in *centres de détention* and *maisons*

centrales, and on Wednesdays in *maisons d'arrêt*,' although the day is usually subject to prison authorities' approval.

The idea of a prison permitting an outside association to create an independent space within its walls, staffed and managed by the association, was revolutionary in itself. The Relais encountered resistance over security concerns and space requirements, and the introduction of an unprecedented element that risked perturbing the status quo. It took, for instance, five years to obtain permission from authorities at Fleury-Mérogis to construct the play area which was finally built in 1992. Exceptionally, it only took between two and three months to convince the prison administration at Poissy, the men's *maison centrale* where the first *espace enfants* was opened in 1989. (Poissy is also the first men's prison the association began working in.) In fact, the initiative for the play area came from within this prison itself. After volunteers had accompanied children to Poissy for some time, the socio-educational services suggested that efforts be made to improve the visiting conditions. Discussion over the play area coincided with the prison's plans to renovate the visiting areas in general, so action could be undertaken more quickly.

In most prisons, much of the resistance to the play areas comes from security guards, since the innovation seems to entail extra work in terms of security searches. The Relais acknowledges these reservations and often therefore agrees to run a play area for a trial period. In Poissy the guards changed their minds at the end of the trial period, and they even requested that Relais workers come twice a week instead of once. They saw that the play areas had made the children calmer and, also, had improved visiting conditions for those without children, since there was less noise. After the *espaces enfants* and *parloirs d'avocats* were set up for the children, security guards noticed that visits ran more smoothly. There were fewer distractions and the inmates were more relaxed. The trial experience here was a precedent, thus facilitating the Relais' efforts to introduce play areas into other prisons.

Some of the play areas are like pockets of light away from the dismal universe of bars and clanging doors. At Fleury-Mérogis, for example, the enclosed room is carpeted in blue with comfortable sapphire-blue sofas and chairs, and the walls are freshly painted in bright pastels. Children's mini-chairs encircle a table brimming with toys. There are books, games, puzzles and crayons, the rooms revolving around the Relais' principle of the object serving as a means to facilitate parent-child exchange. Blanco asks:

> 'How can anyone expect a child to sit still for an hour, without crayons or toys? An hour-long exchange between a

> parent and a child under eight that is exclusively verbal is virtually impossible. In addition, the relationship between the inmate and the child is often a difficult one, exacerbated by what goes unsaid, or by guilt. The toy or crayon is a crucial link between the two.'

At Fleury-Mérogis, up to three families can meet during each session; normally there are two sessions in the morning and two in the afternoon. In most enclosed play areas, however, only one family meets at a time. Parents 'book' space in advance; on average, they meet with their children one hour each month. A Relais worker is always present, but intervenes only when necessary. The volunteer tries not to step in and discipline a child, thus usurping a parent's authority. If a child begins tearing pieces of a puzzle or knocking down chairs, for example, the volunteer encourages the parent to reprimand the child. This is often difficult for parents who feel guilty and are reluctant to discipline the child for fear of alienating him. The volunteer does sometimes intervene to spark interaction between a parent and a child – by asking the child to show a toy or drawing to his or her mother, for example, or by reminding the child of a question he or she had wanted to ask his or her mother. Sometimes the child is overwhelmed by the prison setting, however, and needs a little prodding, so the volunteer steps in. Volunteers also focus on the positive reactions a child may have towards the parent, although the latter may perceive only the negative aspect of the reaction. Here is one example:

> A two year old boy who sees his mother regularly once a month refused to kiss her for a photograph (prisons generally permit disposable cameras to be used for special occasions). Seeing the mother's distress over her son's refusal, the volunteer reminded the mother to be patient and let the child come to her. But the mother was extremely insistent and continuously pulled the boy towards her, seemingly oblivious to his reluctance. Finally, the child broke free and began wandering around the room. The mother felt rejected. Gradually the boy moved closer to his mother and at one point posed for the photograph. The mother was so obsessed with the idea of the kiss that when her son placed his hand on top of hers, she failed to notice it until the volunteer pointed this out.

A psychologist who runs the play area at the women's *maison d'arrêt* at Versailles says that some visits are complex and require intervention, if a mother becomes violent, for example. Prison guards keep watch during the sessions. At Fleury-Mérogis, a guard stands

outside the locked glass door and, at Melun, at one end of the long room. If the child has been battered, it is a *juge des enfants* who grants a visit permit for the child to come to the *espace enfants*. The psychologist relates a case in which a mother charged with child abuse was reunited with her three sons: 'She did not ask them a single question about themselves, didn't try to establish a dialogue. Instead, she talked about her own childhood.' Other visits are more difficult to interpret, yet merely require time for the relationship to unfold. In another case, a boy spent the entire visit reading comic books, turning around from time to time to check whether his father was still there. 'Something is happening, although it is sometimes difficult to tell,' the psychologist says. 'The child is sizing up the situation to reassure himself that his father, arrested six years earlier when he was only three, exists and is his father.'

The potential for physical affection is greatest in the play areas. A young woman and her three children spend the entire hour at Fleury-Mérogis tightly embracing, touching and talking on one of the sofas. The youngest straddles her and enlaces her arms around the mother's neck, the eldest girl is holding her hand. The little boy plays with his mother's watch. They have created their own world, and are relatively oblivious to the others in the room. Despite the fact that the mother killed the father, the family unit gives the impression of being intact, with the mother focusing her full attention on the children.

The Relais staff has observed a correlation between the use of the play areas and a reduced frequency of crying when children leave parents at the end of each visit. 'Children often cry at the end of the first visit, but not after the second,' says Blanco. 'They've understood that there will be "a next time", and they are reassured. What's more, the mothers are calmer, happier and more relaxed. This is transmitted to the child. Everything is explained.'

If there is no play area in a prison, visits take place in the *parloirs d'avocat*, visiting rooms normally reserved for lawyers. The Relais is currently lobbying for toys and children's objects to be allowed into these visiting rooms. The Relais volunteer is present during the entire visit, and this often reassures the child, as the volunteer acts as a non-intrusive third party who eases the transition through security checks and frisking from the 'outside' world into the world of incarceration. The volunteer explains all the procedures to the child, and acts as a buffer during crises – for example, if the volunteer and the child show up for a regularly scheduled visit and the parent has been transferred without the prison having notified the association. It is generally the same person who accompanies the child each time, and the child gradually begins to know and trust the volunteer.

Sarah and Violaine regularly make the two-and-a-half hour journey to visit their father in prison.

> 'I'm bringing a drawing for Dad,' says Sarah, the eldest. 'He's going to hang it on the door of his cell. Prison doesn't scare me, it's just the word I don't like. And I don't like the little cabins where we meet with Dad.'
>
> 'I don't like it when the cop locks the cabin,' interjects Violaine. 'It's strange to be locked in like that. Luckily someone is there when we arrive (a Relais volunteer) and stays with us until we leave. We told her that Dad won't let us say bad words, but "cop" is all right.'

One of the Relais' main goals during visits is to neutralise any negative behaviour from the mother or father. Parents are often confronted with a dilemma: they wish to give the best of themselves to their child, yet they need to know everything about the child's existence, of which they are no longer a part. They pepper their son or daughter with questions, which upsets the child. The child needs to approach the parent through something tangible, something that is part of their daily life. As this is absent, the child tends to remain silent, which annoys the parent. Hence, the necessity of a neutral presence to assist the parent and temper the dynamics. Bouregba explains:

> 'A parent can become harmful in very little time. The despair and distress of being in prison can be translated by the will to hurt one's next-of-kin. Sometimes the parent will use the child to settle a family argument. The child has no part in this. The father often feels he has lost all say in his family life. As soon as he has a little piece of something – and the child can be that "little piece of something" – he wants to grab onto it to regain power within his family. He can become very violent and harmful and drag the child into something that does not concern him. Here, you have to show great vigilance and sometimes, the volunteer must be somewhat severe. You have to know how to make the parent tune into his or her child.'

Counselling

The aim of reducing the drama of a first visit between parents and children led to the creation of the Relais' fourth tool: individual counselling by psychologists inside the prisons. Blanco expands:

> 'Since we started our work we have distinguished two kinds of demands from prisoners: a practical, concrete, everyday

> demand concerning primarily their children; and other more intimate and personal needs. These may include emotional needs or sexual frustration and are dealt with by Relais psychologists through individual counselling sessions.'

According to the penitentiaries' medical services, 70 per cent of detained mothers need professional help to confront their pain. More than half of the women in prison suffer from depression and more than one-third request to see a doctor every day. Since 1991, the Justice Ministry has noted a sharp rise in suicides, particularly among women inmates. In 1994, 101 inmates, 10 of them women, committed suicide, 98 by hanging or strangulation. There were 537 attempted suicides. Over 68 per cent of suicides occur within the first six months of imprisonment; over 20 per cent occur during the first 15 days. In March 1994, Social Affairs Minister Simone Weil earmarked a USD 12 million increase in the medical budget of French prisons, specifically for psychiatric care.

Depression and suicide are often rooted in anxiety over children; conversely, reinforcing a parent's bond with their child adds an element of hope and purpose, a reason to carry on. The penitentiaries' medical services often advise patients to seek counselling from the Relais when inmates express anxiety or concern regarding their children. Each mother can attend individual sessions once a week in rooms near the workshops; due to high demand and the dramatically higher number of male inmates, each father can attend sessions every two weeks.

The key function of individual counselling sessions is to prepare a parent to meet with his or her child. By helping inmates piece together their identity as parents, as previously explored in Chapter Two, the Relais ultimately helps the child. But the association remains highly vigilant.

> 'We don't take the risk of accompanying children to see their parents unless the meeting is very well prepared,' says Bouregba. 'Some parents can be harmful and dangerous. In some cases, we might even have to refuse a visit if we don't know the parent.'

When the psychologists work with parents in therapy, they focus on behaviours which are detrimental to the child, such as when a father uses his children to pressure the mother. At times, the parent fails to respond and instead begins to cancel out the child's thoughts and sensations. 'Sometimes we have to lecture the parent, saying "You can't do that, you have to do this",' says Bouregba. 'And if the parent

doesn't do this, we cut off the visits. We don't make contact just for the sake of establishing contact.'

The Relais has come across extreme cases of physical abuse in which the children have been burned, mutilated, their ribs forced in. A 1994 study found that among 16,000 battered and abused children in France, 25 per cent had been sexually abused.[4] Incest impacts all social classes in France. Nine per cent of convicted men were sentenced for sexual abuse involving children over whom they had custody.[5] Yet children may express a desire to see an imprisoned parent, no matter what the crime committed. The child is petrified, yet asks to see his or her mother or father. Where an outsider is frequently shocked by prison bars and security guards, children are often reassured by their presence. Bouregba explains:

> 'The environment must instil confidence. You cannot forget that prisons have two functions: to punish and to protect. When the mother or father is in prison for abusing the child, he or she has been put there by society because the latter judged that the child had to be protected from violence. If the child is protected, maybe prison is the best place to get something going again. It would be wrong to think that you can wait until the parent is released. It is better to start right away.'

Incest and sexual abuse

Statistics and research reveal that over 40 per cent of abusive parents were separated from their families and placed in institutions at some point in their lives, either for short or long durations, usually as a result of family problems.[6] This demonstrates that separating an abused or neglected child from his or her parent offers no long-term solution. In other words, the abusive parent must be a target of therapeutic intervention as well, in line with the Relais' holistic philosophy of helping the family as well as the child. Bouregba cites programmes in Belgium and the Netherlands which support this philosophy.[7] In one of these, after four years of treating the families of 2,011 children, including 512 sexual abuse cases, the Brussels-based *Centre Médecins-Confidents*[8] reported an 80 per cent success rate in reinserting the child into the family unit without recidivism.

Incest cases are complicated by two factors: the victim's high degree of loyalty, which must be taken into account in assessing the child's wish to see the parent, and by the disassociation of the parent regarding his act. 'The key to this enigma lies in therapy for the abuser,' said Professor Igodt, a psychiatrist and family therapist who

teaches at the University of Leuven in Belgium, during the 1994 Colloquium on Family Ties and Imprisonment. Igodt sees the therapy as a three-step process. First, examination and diagnosis of each abusive parent on a case by case basis, as Igodt considers each instance of incest as being more heterogeneous than homogenous an act. The second stage must lead to the abuser feeling empathy for the victim and an authentic desire for reparation, not just a symbolic one. Last, group therapy should be conducted, involving the family together, as long as they are well prepared for sessions. 'Incest happens in the family, and it is there that it has to be resolved,' says Igodt.

The Relais staff were surprised at the number of parents seeking counselling who had been convicted of sexual abuse of minors. Inmates have questions about what has happened to them and how they have ended up in their present situation, but questions are geared more towards the self than the child. The incestuous father often does not consciously know that he is the father of his child; he has lost all psychological grounding to his identity. The Relais therapist often must overcome an initial sense of repulsion before listening to the parent, particularly since the association's focus is on the child. Once this is surmounted, discussion is the counsellor's therapeutic tool. 'We don't react to an event, we react according to what we are able to say about it,' says Bouregba, who has been counselling inmates convicted of incest since 1992. 'When we speak, we give a direction, a meaning. The purpose of speech is to give meaning. Reactions will be entirely different to each given situation. It is not the event in itself that is significant but the way in which it is translated into language.'

Theories on incest abound, and frequently point to a need to assert power." Bouregba explains his theory on how incest can occur and how a mother can often become an accomplice to the act:

> 'Unconsciously, the father is looking for proof of a biological link to the child. He wants proof that he is linked sensually to his child. He becomes an auxiliary mother to a certain extent. The man ceases to exist in his role as father. Why is the man the father? The child is linked to him by language, by law. In the eyes of the law, one is not the father because one is the genitor, but because one has legally recognised the child as yours. Law, society and language create the bond of fatherhood.
>
> If the father does not feel satisfied with this social bond, he may want to reinforce a sensual bond (a latent desire in all fathers).

> No matter what the cost, he takes the risk of eliminating the bond being merely social. By abusing his child, he ceases to be the father. As he stops being the father, he reinforces the mother in her role, who is often unconsciously satisfied: she becomes an accomplice to the act. She derives secondary benefits from it; she is elevated in her role as mother.'

Bouregba sees the impact of incest on a child as being 'irreparable'. The child is precipitated into a primitive world in which emotions and sensations cannot be verbalised.

> 'It is extremely difficult for a child to metabolise this kind of trauma. I am puzzled by society's response in seeing prison as the only answer to sexual abuse. And I'm also puzzled and scandalised over how this act is often banalised by a parent or any adult. These children are paralysed, petrified, and must be psychologically bandaged for years until they can return to what happened once they have access to their own sexuality.'

In principle, Relais workers do not accompany victims of incest. As a rule, the convicted parent is stripped of parental rights and judges forbid these visits to take place. However, judges do ask the Relais to accompany the siblings of incest victims once the parent has been convicted. A mother whose husband has been stripped of his parental rights may seek help for her child to be accompanied to see the father. Many are surprised by the number of victims who wish to see the abusive parent. Other victims withdraw into a secret world; seeing the parent, usually the father, means shattering this secret world. Bouregba explains:

> 'The dynamics of an incestuous family are characterised by an exaggerated cohesive weight. Denouncing the act allows a momentary break in this cohesiveness, but the family soon returns to the fold and is bound even more tightly by the secret. The children sense this weight and often wish to break away from this secret. Visiting the father would allow the child to break away from the secret.'

Blanco feels, however, that there are still too many barriers and taboos surrounding the issue for judges to permit visits on a regular basis. She relates one of her experiences:

> 'A 13 year old girl who had been sexually abused by her father approached the Relais. She wanted to meet him, as he was to be released soon and she wanted to prepare for this. She had been in therapy, stopped, then had begun again. Initially she had been extremely angry at both her parents; she had rejected

them both. She didn't come to terms with the abuse until the end of her father's prison sentence, seven years later. She was asking for assistance with the visit. It was a very wise initiative. We took the necessary steps vis-à-vis the prison establishment and the director sent us to the judge who handled visiting permits. This judge refused a visit permit. Both the director and the judge had pulled their heads inside their shells, leaving everything for the post-release period. It was really too bad. The child could have approached the parent while he was still in custody, physically protected. Working through dynamics during incarceration is fundamental. The release must be prepared for, to help this adolescent, for her future and her life as a woman.'

Notes and references

1. Bastard, Benoit and Cardia-Vonèche, 'Des pratiques novatrices en faveur du maintien des liens après la séparation.' In: *Enfants, parents, separations*, Cahier No 8, 1994, Fondation de France, Paris.

2. See for example Lacan, Jacques (1958) 'La signification du phallus'. In: *Les Ecrits*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966.

3. Most children in France do not attend school on Wednesdays, hence many activities are scheduled for that day.

4. 'Observatoire de l'enfance en danger.' In: *La lettre de l'ODAS*, Paris, May 1995.

5. From an interview with Alain Bouregba on *Radio France Culture, Espace Education* on 9 March 1995.

6. Lampo, Annick (1994), 'Liens familiaux et détention.' In: *Transitions 39*, ASEPSI, Paris, 1994.

7. Bouregba, Alain, 'Liens ou chaines? L'enfant victime d'un parent dangereux.' In: *Dialogue (REVUE)* 1er trimestre, 1993, AFCCC, Kremlin-Bicêtre.

8. See Sgroi, S (1986) *L'agression sexuelle de l'enfant: approches et thérapies*, Quebec: Trecarré.

9. Literally translated the *Centre Médecins-Confidents* is the 'Centre of Confidential Doctors'. It is a centre where adults can receive specialised counselling and medical care on a confidential basis. Cases usually involve physical or sexual abuse, negligence, psychological disturbance and so on.

Chapter 4

The volunteer

Volunteers are the lifeblood of the local Relais, and becoming one entails a commitment in time and energy. The volunteers perform various activities: processing reports, pamphlets, funding requests, mailing campaigns and other correspondence; housing children who have travelled great distances to see their parents; staffing prison workshops in coordination with professionals; following specialised training; getting materials to be used in the workshops, either by soliciting companies and outlets for donations or by obtaining cut-rate goods wholesale; assisting in fund-raising and publicity activities, such as staffing Relais booths at fairs, organising raffles and lotteries; and accompanying Blanco and others on information tours, speaking engagements and training programmes.

Volunteers are predominantly female, between the ages of 35 and 60, and tend to be from fairly well-established social classes. About one third are retired, the rest come from a range of professions, including journalism, business and medicine. They form an extensive, tightly knit life-support system that ensures the continuity and permanence of the Relais' activities. Most carry out their unpaid work with energy and enthusiasm and a high degree of personal commitment. 'Many see this as a way of giving some meaning to their citizenship,' says Bouregba. 'I think that there is a strong desire to be an active participant in society.'

Being a volunteer that accompanies children also entails making a commitment to the children. Volunteers are put in charge of one or several children, whom they accompany to the prison once every two weeks or once a month, on average. 'I prefer that volunteers not be too professional,' says Suzanne Roger, who coordinates visits and runs monthly support meetings for volunteers. 'If they're too professional, they're often too directive, they feel as if they have to intervene as professionals. It is difficult for them to let the situation unfold.'

In recent years, the volunteer training programme has been tailored according to individual needs and interests. A basic introductory training course, divided into two parts, is held several times a year. However, about half the new volunteers opt to start accompanying children before actually following the training. According to Blanco, much of this decision lies with the individual's profile, background and 'sensitivity'. Volunteers then have the option of honing their expertise through a panoply of training modules held at later points in time. 'We have reached a stage where people are asking for the course to be officially accredited at the ministerial level,' says Bouregba. 'Volunteers would like it to lead to an official diploma.'

The first part of the basic training course, which spans an intensive five-day period, examines various kinds of separation from a psychological point of view – according to a child's age, which parent he or she has been separated from, the length of separation, and so on. The second part of the basic course focuses on separation from a legal point of view. The family code and the rights of the detained parent are discussed to help the volunteers understand the context in which they are working.

The theoretical training is complemented and fine-tuned during monthly meetings which explore practical applications of the training. In addition to providing supervision and support, these meetings provide a platform for concrete problems and issues which volunteers encounter during their work. In the box on page 54 are a few examples of the kinds of issues raised during one of the monthly meetings at the Relais.

The Relais tries to prepare volunteers to envisage the multitude of situations which can crop up between a parent and child.

> 'It is never simple,' says Bouregba. 'We want to avoid any restricted or dogmatic approach. We invite them to reflect rather than judge, and to surmount any kind of bias they may have. To go deeper and deeper towards an opening.'

A sample of issues raised at monthly volunteer support meetings

- Neutrality towards all sides – the child, the parent, the child's caregiver and the prison services – is the most essential prerequisite for a volunteer. This may be hard to achieve because prison visits may affect the volunteer emotionally. To maintain a distance and neutrality in the face of a child's emotional needs is particularly difficult to achieve.

- Volunteers also need to remain neutral while interacting with the child or the parent. They are not to relay messages or objects from the detainee to the child and the caregiving family or vice versa. There is one exception: photographs can be brought in after security clearance, but they must be taken out upon departure.

- Children are equally not permitted to bring parents gifts or to receive gifts during visits. Volunteers are to explain to the child, as well as to the parent, that permission is required from security services for any kind of exchange. This even holds for self-picked flowers or a drawing made by the child.

- Volunteers are not to leave the parent and child alone during prison visits since agreements on the volunteer's presence have been reached with the prison administration. Besides, it is vital to hear and to know what has transpired during the parent/child encounter, particularly to support the child adequately after the end of the visit.

- At times volunteers need to mediate with the prison-based social workers who may want to hamper the visit on grounds that the parent is judged unfit. In such a case volunteers are to take the side of parent arguing that a parent cannot simply be 'erased' from the child's environment.

Additional modules are offered for volunteers to supplement their knowledge and experience. One explores the issue of maintaining the child-parent bond in greater detail. Volunteers examine various ways in which the bond can be preserved, followed by an analysis of the process of accompanying children to visit an imprisoned parent. Another module concentrates on child abuse, in light of the increase in numbers of parents detained for this reason. 'Volunteers are confronted with these parents,' says Bouregba. 'They have to know how to listen to their distress and not dwell on an initial sense of repulsion. They also have to know how to avoid the manipulation that some of these parents are capable of.' Yet another module concentrates on family conflicts and trains volunteers in mediation techniques, specifically, how to observe family dynamics, how to determine if the conflict is conjugal, inter-generational, or an adolescent crisis, and how to define a response.

The modules are offered several times a year in various regions of France. This is partly to save on accommodation costs for volunteers living far from Paris, but it is also a reflection of the

network's expansion. The courses, which have been held in such cities as Lyon, Marseilles, Rouen and Rennes, are coordinated by Bouregba and taught by a team of lecturers, including judges, sociologists and psychologists specialising in parenting issues. Guest lecturers from other disciplines are regularly invited to teach the course's different modules.

Children living inside prisons

Each year, 23 prisons in France house approximately 70 children under the age of 18 months. From 1990 to 1993, 224 children lived in prisons for an average of five months. Children have no legal status inside the prison and may only stay with the mother until 18 months of age. After this they must leave their mothers and are placed elsewhere 'according to their best interests'.

The Relais' main focus with respect to infants living with their mothers in prison is to serve as a bridge to the outside world. Volunteers bring the infant to see an incarcerated father, for example, or accompany the child to the caregiver family for a weekend to spend time with siblings. Conversely, the Relais workers observe how the siblings outside prison cope with jealousy over the infant's proximity to the mother. They help the siblings understand the situation and try to allay jealousy or hostility – during visits to the *espace enfants*, for example, where the siblings can visit both the mother and the infant.

The Relais endorses the premise that infants living in prison with their mothers should be taken to a crèche outside the prison during the day. This is highly preferable to placing the children in prison-based crèches. Outside, they can interact with other infants and toddlers and are not stigmatised or labelled as 'prison babies'. They receive rich and diverse stimuli, unavailable within the prison world and so vital for healthy development. In Marseille, for example, Relais staff act as liaisons with the local *Protection Maternelle Infantile* (P.M.I.) services outside the prison to bring infants to crèches each day. Although the volunteers occasionally assist prison staff in running nurseries, as in Rouen, the Relais' focus remains on the link with the exterior world, while emphasising the need for maternal warmth and body contact, which the mother can provide upon the infant's return from the crèche.

Chapter 5

Meshing with the 'real' world

The Judicial Reality

In campaigning for recognition by the judicial system of prisoners' children's needs, the Relais (or any organisation working to gain recognition for this group), exposes a dilemma facing the basis of the system: if justice is based on punishing the guilty and protecting the innocent, how can the fact be reconciled that innocent children are not being protected, but are being penalised as well? As Hounslow *et al.* note:

> Those who uphold the prevailing legal and penal ideology cannot afford to consider what happens to prisoners' children, as any recognition of their plight strikes at the very notions of 'justice', 'innocence' and 'guilt' upon which this ideology is founded. [1]

This is one explanation for the silence and neglect that has shadowed the issue of children of prisoners. It also conveys an idea of the legal context in which the Relais has been operating. Although articles in the Civil Code, the Constitution and the Penal Procedure Code deal with the issue of children's relationships to their imprisoned parents, many judges often opt to ignore the existence of these clauses, and the texts themselves are geared more to parents' rights than to children's. Despite these obstacles, the Relais has managed to effect radical changes in sensitising a number of judges to the issue of prisoners' children. In 1986, the Relais observed that, on average, four out of five judges believed that prison is no place for children; today, one out of five judges makes this claim.

The Relais' first strategy was to shift the focus onto the child's inalienable rights, as separate from those of the parent. 'The majority of texts deal with the right of imprisoned parents to have a relationship with their child rather than the opposite,' the *juge des*

enfants Philippe Chaillou said at the 1991 Conference on Children, Parents and Prison.[2] He cited such Articles in the Civil Code as 375.7, Paragraph 2 which, loosely translated, stipulates that 'if it is necessary to place the child elsewhere than where the parents reside, the latter retain visiting and correspondence rights.' The Relais' strategy in gearing laws more towards children was boosted by the ratification of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, more precisely, Article 9 of the Convention, which details the child's right to maintain the link with a parent. Despite the lack of a supranational body overseeing judicial decisions, the Convention has carried some weight in national rulings. In June 1994, for example, a woman living illegally in France refused to board an airplane after being expelled and was taken to court. A judge ruled that the woman, whose child had been placed in the care of the A.S.E., could legally remain on French soil as it was in the child's best interest.

On the other hand, some judges see the Convention as having minimal impact in France. Marc Janin, who worked as a *juge des enfants* from 1979 to 1992, claims that the Convention's impact has been to trigger reflection on the legal status of children in an ambiguous system: a system that grants children the right to voice an opinion, but not the right to have it taken into account except in cases such as placing a child. In other legal domains, such as in the cases of divorce, parental custody and so on, the child is not a party to proceedings. Janin cites the *Loi Malhuret*, a law passed in 1987 that stipulates that children over 13 must be heard during divorce proceedings. Judges can thus take into account what the child voices. This is not done systematically, however.[3]

In sum, Chaillou cautions that 'the reality is very far from what the law tells us, which is that the only limitation in the relationship between children and imprisoned parents is the child's best interests.' He elaborates on the attitudes of decision-makers in interpreting the law:

> 'How many times have those requesting permits for a child who wishes to see an incarcerated parent heard – from the very start – a peremptory voice reply, "Prison is no place for a child"? In reality, in this domain, examining magistrates and prison directors act in the most discretionary way. Some systematically oppose any child visiting an incarcerated parent. On what basis? An arbitrary decision. Each year, 140,000 children are subjected to these arbitrary decisions.'

Through lobbying efforts – writing, telephoning and faxing judges to influence decisions on granting permissions – and with the great

support of the media, the Relais set out to change these attitudes. Blanco says:

> 'Our objective has been to change priorities. The difficulties the Relais runs into always come down to a balance of power. When a mother doesn't want her child to visit his or her imprisoned father, she is often putting the conflict with her partner ahead of the child's needs. When the *juges des enfants* want to prevent all contact between children and their incestuous parents, we remind them that their priority is not necessarily the children's. When judges say that prison is not a place for children, we remind them that the trauma suffered by children at not seeing their father or mother is even more serious.'

Conferences organised by the Relais have been instrumental in changing attitudes. During the 1991 conference mentioned above, for example, Bénédicte Scelle, a *juge de l'application des peines* who examines individual cases at Fleury-Mérogis, gave the following testimony during a round table discussion:

> 'The exchange of various ideas during this colloquium will incite me to take the issue of maintaining the parent-child link, of safeguarding the family bond into account from now on – an issue which all *juges de l'application des peines* must weigh in the exercise of their function.'

Although judges tend to recognise the mother's link to the child more easily than the father's, as previously mentioned, the Relais has been instrumental in gradually fostering trust among certain judges. Two judges in Ile-de-France, who categorically refused all permits for children under 13 wishing to visit their parents, now grant permits for children in this age bracket exclusively to the Relais. The evolution in mentality which culminated in a new Penal Code that took effect on 1 March 1994. Although the idea was tabled by Alain Bruel, the president of the Children's Tribunal in Paris, during the 1991 conference, it wasn't until 1993 that the Justice Ministry granted prisoners' families the right to contact the court of criminal appeal if a judge refused rights of access for more than one month; what's more, the judge had to give his refusal in writing.

In addition to judges granting visit permits more easily, the Relais claims that more judges are becoming increasingly conscientious of family ties when sentencing parents. They cite the case of a *juge de l'application des peines* who, at the moment of sentencing a couple to three years' imprisonment each for fraud, ruled that the couple

would take turns serving their terms, given that they were the parents of two young children. But family ties seldom have an impact on the location where an inmate will be imprisoned, particularly in regard to prisoners on remand. For example, because the enquiry remains the judge's pivotal concern, the *maison d'arrêt* closest in proximity to the court will be designated over one nearer the family.

According to judge Luc Rosenczveig, who also heads the *Conseil Français des Associations pour les Droits de l'Enfant*, an advisory body representing children's rights associations, during the 1994 Colloquium on Family Ties and Imprisonment:

> 'Whatever our professional role, the law gives us the imperative of safeguarding, if not restoring, the family bond and working on this bond in order for children to maintain a relationship with their parents, and overcome their present situation to prepare for the next one. Imprisonment should not be experienced as definitive, but as one stage in the life of an individual. Being imprisoned does not stand in the way of the fact that a legal bond continues to act between parent and child. Somewhere a relationship is going to have to be organised. It is less the law that is at stake than the establishment of very concrete measures to enact it.'

Forging partnerships

The Relais distinguishes three periods to describe the evolving relationship with its partners, both inside and outside prisons. During the introductory phase, partners working in the field showed great wariness towards the activities proposed by the Relais. Bouregba explains,

> 'People wondered whether we were suddenly going to upset their way of doing things. Then, through conferences, articles and other consciousness-raising activities, this attitude gave way to one of cooperation. As we continued our work and became better known in specialised circles, we came to be regarded as experts.'

Very few services now ignore the need for action towards children whose parents are in prison. At the Justice Ministry, it has become a reflex, according to Bouregba. The issue is broached in all of the ministry's relevant publications. For the first time, a 1993 statistical analysis of prisons in France, published by the Justice Ministry, includes a table detailing the number of children each inmate reportedly has.

The Relais sits on several inter-ministerial committees and its expertise is solicited by a growing number of institutions. 'I will never be able to sufficiently emphasise the remarkable and pioneering role played by the Relais Enfants-Parents,' said Bernard Prévost, then director of the French penitentiary administration, as he opened the 1994 Colloquium on Family Ties and Imprisonment. Prévost went on to emphasise the need to develop harmonisation among the various partners involved, as well as to decentralise the fundamental issues at stake to the local level. He also stressed the need for alternatives to prison. In 1994, nearly 38,000 home leaves were granted to more than 16,000 inmates: 51 per cent to sentenced inmates in *maisons d'arrêt*; and 49 per cent to sentenced prisoners in *centres de détention* and *maisons centrales*. According to Justice Ministry statistics, 86 per cent were granted specifically to maintain family bonds. Yet the issue of separation remains salient, given that home leaves are usually granted towards the end of prison sentences.

The main strategy within the Justice Ministry has been to forge solid relationships with key figures. In 1996, the Deputy Director of Reinsertion at the Ministry introduced Blanco to the new director of penitentiary administration as the head of an association which is '*incontournable*' – one that won't take no for an answer. 'We'll present our programme to him,' says Blanco, referring to director Gilbert Azibert, 'and ask for a little bit more.'

In general, the Relais finds that when it appeals to the Justice Ministry, the latter listens. The Relais can add leverage to a sentenced inmate's transfer request based on proximity to his or her family by writing to the Justice Ministry or, if the inmate's remaining sentence is less than three years, to the regional prison administration concerned. Although the association tends to do this only in exceptional cases – for a child whose illness is exacerbated by the father's absence, for example, or a case in which a renewed bond between a father and child is in the embryonic stages and an impending transfer away from the family would imperil it – the ministry has heeded their intervention each time. 'We are pretty well established,' says Blanco. 'We would have to really commit a major error to alienate the authorities now – like sparking a revolt in one of the prisons.'

This is less the case with its partners inside the prisons. Though the different associations have managed to establish crucial relationships with the social services within prisons, it has not always been an easy task. A prison's socio-educational services are staffed by educators who are civil servants employed by the penitentiary administration. They are in charge of facilitating the reinsertion of inmates. These services are severely understaffed; on

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average, there is one social worker for 100 inmates. Although the socio-educational services are generally the ones to ask the Relais to intervene when a prisoner requests help with a child, the Relais workers still encounter a certain degree of wariness with some. Blanco explains:

> 'They are the social workers and some of them see us as social workers too. We have to treat them with kid gloves at times so that they understand that we're not taking away half of their work. We try to show them that we are complementary partners, acting in tandem. We're not there to replace them or act as substitutes. We constantly repeat that we are childhood specialists: they don't have the same background or experience as we do. They're there for the inmate, we're there for the children. That's the way they've got to see it. And when they do, they're our number one allies.'

The Relais' relentless efforts are gradually lessening the resistance of the prison-based services, and more fluid working relationships are being developed. It telephones the socio-educational services or sends documentation to explain its activities and describe its procedures. It puts forward issues raised by its workers during prison staff meetings; respective responsibilities are outlined and the relevant issues addressed.

Social workers outside the prison are also becoming more cooperative. The Relais' most important partner in this regard is the A.S.E., whose main mission is to help maintain the link between children and parents. Staff members of the child welfare department occasionally consult Relais workers when dealing with difficult cases, such as abuse. The Relais in turn alerts them when it comes across children under their care who are separated from their detained parent. Allowing A.S.E. staff and other social workers access to the *espaces enfants* has strengthened cooperation further. And, once again, the transitional object crafted in the workshops comes into play: the Relais contacts the social worker to enquire whether the child received the gift. If so, what was their reaction? Were they happy to receive it?

But the Relais still sees a need to sensitise these partners to the realities of prison life. The associations observe that many social workers harbour fears of prison and are reluctant to bring children to see their parents. They feel that this reveals to them the 'bad' side of reality. In addition, some social workers who constantly witness a child's distress over having a parent in prison are more apt to be judgemental about the parent.

Constant advocacy and attention

Why do these attitudes towards prisons and the presumed incompatibility of being a parent and a prisoner persist? Obviously, the roots of taboos run deep, particularly when imagination triumphs over reality and stereotypes flourish. But, more importantly, it is a question of perspective, especially where the Relais is concerned. Although few doubt the importance of the child-parent bond, in the eyes of many prison directors, socio-educational services, and judges, each change in policy the Relais manages to obtain is deemed a concession, not a right. As a result, despite the strides made in sensitising professionals and the general public to the needs of prisoners' children, and in having an impact on legal and prison policy, the striving continues: issues concerning the children of prisoners need constant advocacy and attention.

This is particularly true for those who are the most difficult to reach, such as prison security guards – a group which the Relais workers feel needs urgent targeting. 'Nothing will be solidly acquired within prison walls until we have managed to make the issue of receiving families one of the main lines of training for the guards,' says Bouregba. A first step in this direction has been made. A new training module has been included in the guards' initial training curriculum to make them aware of the situation of children of prisoners. More importantly, trainees can do a placement with the Relais as part of their practical training requirements. 'It is only a first step, but it is a big step,' says Blanco. 'They can see what our work is like for an entire week, as they accompany us on our prison activities. They get yelled at by the other prison guards, so they know how that feels.' In this way security guards are sensitised to the issues and needs surrounding the children of prisoners at the start of their career. The Relais' staff stresses to the guards their key role in guiding the children through the prison environment and helping to alleviate their fears and anxieties.

The media has played a vital role in sensitising professionals and the general public to the existence and needs of this group of children. Blanco and Bouregba are regularly invited to participate in radio and television programmes and talk shows. They also encourage coverage of the issue of children of prisoners – and to a lesser extent of the Relais' work – by magazines and newspapers. Major national dailies such as *Le Monde* and *Libération* have run articles on the activities of the assoications, the former once giving them front-page coverage.

Television documentaries such as Jean-Michel Carré's *Galères de femmes* (women in dire straits), filmed in part at Fleury-Mérogis

and broadcast on national television, have had tremendous impact on both the general public and prison staff and are leading to change. An example of this is a scene in *Galères de femmes* that showed a woman in solitary confinement as she was being served dinner. The prison guard set the food tray down on the floor and pushed the bowls and cutlery through a gap underneath the door, similar to the manner in which a dog would be fed. Following reaction to the broadcast, Fleury-Mérogis prison staff began to enforce regulations requiring all prison guards to open doors for meal delivery. This film was broadcast on ARTE, a Franco-German cultural channel featuring thematic programmes, in this case, drug addiction. Encouraged by the viewers' reactions, the Relais is currently trying to organise a special programme covering prison issues to be shown on ARTE.

Media features on prison-related issues have also assisted in recruiting volunteers who wish to participate in the Relais' work. A panel talk show based on children visiting their parents in prison recently prompted two volunteers to join the Relais staff.

The network is gradually expanding, with new local associations springing up regularly; but it will take time to establish a network capable of meeting existing needs. The associations estimate that over 10 per cent of imprisoned parents never see their children and that only a tiny proportion of the needs of prisoners' children throughout France are being met by them, given budgetary and logistical constraints.

Extending assistance to more children means constant advocacy and attempts to reach a broader professional and general public. The Relais currently initiates an entire web of sensitisation activities. Schools are a prime strategic target. Secondary schools invite Relais workers to talk about prison-related issues with students in general civics courses or in courses which examine the role of local community groups and associations in grassroots prison work. Higher education institutions ask the Relais to participate in 'information days' for training courses for *puéricultrices* or *assistantes maternelles* (early childhood educators). The Relais also participates in training programmes for prison visitors, through an exchange of ideas with the staff of prison visitors' centres. Church-based groups of all denominations invite the Relais to speak at parish events or to participate in national meetings of prison chaplains. In addition to arranging national conferences, the Relais frequently takes part in the *Forum des Associations*, a large trade fair in which the Relais associations and other organisations are represented by information booths staffed by volunteers who distribute pamphlets, press dossiers, stickers,

logos and other items. Such events are held on both community and national levels. The Relais is often nominated for human rights awards and participates in competitive events, frequently sponsored by banks or newspapers. These award cash prizes and, particularly in the latter case, a certain degree of coverage in the newspaper itself – about the Relais, but more fundamentally about the existence of this group of children.

Notes and references

1. Hounslow, B., Stephenson, A., Steward, J., and Crancher, J. (1982), *Children of Imprisoned Parents*, The Family & Children's Services Agency, Ministry of Youth & Community Services of New South Wales, Australia.

2. This conference was organised by the Relais and the Fondation de France. The presentations and discussions are available in 'Enfants, Parents, Prison', *Les Cahiers* No. 4, Fondation de France, 1992, Paris.

3. Gabrielle Hugonnet, 'De la place des enfants dans notre societé', In: *Action Solidaire*, No 4 Nov/Dec 1994.

4. The European Colloquium on Family Ties and Imprisonment in November 1995 in Paris was organised by the Federation of the Relais Enfants-Parents and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The presentations are available in 'Colloque Europeen: liens familiaux et detention', *Transitions no. 39*, Association pour l'Etude et la Promotion des Structure Intermédiaires, 1995, Paris.

Chapter 6

A European perspective

Since its creation, the Relais Enfants-Parents has snowballed from a Paris-based pilot programme aiming to tap into issues surrounding the children of prisoners, to a far-reaching national network devoted to deepening action and awareness on these issues. Similar associations have sprung up in Canada and Belgium, with the French programme serving as their reference point. For the past three years, the Relais has been instrumental in initiating a network at European level. The goals of this network are: to put the issues surrounding prisoners' children on a European agenda; to sensitise a broader public to these issues; and to search for innovative ideas and methods in dealing with this group of children. The Relais estimates that over one million children in European Union countries are separated from one or both incarcerated parents. Since September 1993, consultations with representatives from eight European countries are under way on issues of prisoners' children.

Initially workshops were organised in Brussels (Belgium), Marseille, and Reims, calling upon professionals in prison-related fields of work to talk about their experiences of working with prisoners' children. Participants from the Netherlands, Belgium, the UK, Germany, France, Portugal, Italy, and Spain included social workers, prison directors and staff, ministry officials, psychologists, researchers, judicial experts and members of voluntary organisations. It became apparent during these initial meetings that a steering committee was required to coordinate the groups' efforts.

Further workshops were organised in Paris, Barcelona (Spain), and Heerhugowaard (the Netherlands). The goals were to exchange ideas, discuss policies, brainstorm on issues concerning the children of imprisoned parents, and ultimately, to draft a first 'state of the art report' highlighting the conditions and needs of prisoners'

children in various European countries. The report would serve as a strategic multi-purpose tool: to sensitise both the general public and experts on the conditions of this category of children; to assemble the vast array of innovative approaches implemented in different European countries to caring for these children and maintaining the child-parent bond; to urge prison administrations to review the visiting conditions for prisoners' children, and to appeal to related ministries and judges to make a child's right to maintain contact with his or her parents inviolate. The child was clearly at the heart of the workshops. With these goals in mind, the European Action Research Committee on Children of Imprisoned Parents was formed in 1995. Members of this Committee organise 'national study days' at country level. These workshops raise awareness on the issue in national professional circles, and will fill the wide gaps in data collection that continue to persist.

The Committee's preliminary findings show that, in 1995, most countries had only skeletal support systems for the children of imprisoned parents, while others, such as the Netherlands and the UK, are making strides in establishing practical tools to foster the child-parent bond. In the UK, the subject of prisoners' children is broadly covered through the efforts of voluntary organisations such as Save the Children and the Prisoners' Families Support Network, an umbrella organisation of volunteer groups. At Holloway prison, near London, children can visit their imprisoned mothers and spend a full day on one of two Sundays per month. In Manchester prison, a house which was formerly a children's home is used for six hour visits for a total of four women, with a volunteer present to facilitate contact. In the Netherlands projects have been launched such as *Ouders, Kinderen en Detentie* (Parents, Children and Detention). This project began in January 1994 to organise outings for prisoners' children and it brings children aged eight to 16 together with a volunteer 'mentor'. These mentors organise, and accompany the children on, recreational activities such as sports and entertainment.

New horizons for the Relais

The Relais launched its first *espace rencontre*, or family mediation service, in December 1993 to deal with the difficulty that newly released inmates face in reuniting with the family unit. The mediation service, staffed by both professionals and volunteers, enables children to meet with their parents in a neutral setting. Prisoners who have had prior experience with the Relais and have since been released often use the *espace rencontre* to tighten and solidify bonds with their children or spouses, particularly if they remain separated. Mediation can take several forms. For example,

upon the request of a separated or divorced parent, or a judge, the Relais will organise a meeting between children and their parents who have just been released, whether permanently or on parole. In many cases, these meetings aim to provide a framework for problems to be worked through and dynamics hammered out. This might entail helping children to accept that their parents may have to go back to prison or live outside the home.

The *espace rencontre* also provides a place for parents who do not live with their children (80 per cent of whom are fathers) to meet with them, thus safeguarding the parental status. In cases of domestic violence, mothers can bring the children to the *espace rencontre* to see their fathers, as the Relais acts as a buffer. At times, a judge may order that a meeting take place within a protected sphere, which the *espace rencontre* provides. Children of divorced parents are also assisted here, which often involves parents who refuse all contact with each other: one drops the child off at the Relais, the other picks the child up.

Caregiver families who resist the idea of children visiting an imprisoned parent may also be involved with the *espace rencontre*. Here, they can express their fears and reservations; in turn, the Relais can try and temper their hostility and obtain permission for a visit. In response to the increasing demand for the mediation services, the Relais opened a second *espace rencontre* in 1995 in Ile-de-France. Both facilities are financed by the statutory services.

Another key step in facilitating reinsertion for inmates after their release, which is particularly difficult when families have broken apart during imprisonment, is the *bail glissant* or sliding lease, a project launched by the Relais in 1995. The Relais rents 10 apartments through the *Conseil Général* and, standing as guarantor, rents them in turn to 10 families. There is a two-year period during which the renter must become self-sufficient; then the lease is transferred to his or her name. Hence the name 'sliding lease'. Candidates for the sliding leases are often newly released inmates with whom the Relais had previously worked inside the prisons.

Ventures into other forms of child-parent separation

Recently, the Relais expanded its activities to encompass other forms of separation. Since Françoise May Levin, a prominent cancer specialist, became President of the Relais in December 1994, there has been a greater focus on children who are separated from parents through illness.

In December 1995, following six months of preparation, the Relais began a programme involving discussion groups with cancer patients. May Levin is overseeing the project in collaboration with the *Ligue Nationale Contre le Cancer*, a leading voluntary association working with cancer patients. The group work will revolve around issues such as how parents can tell their children the truth about their illness, how to help them cope with the illness, and coming to terms with death.

Another area within this broadened approach involves working with mothers afflicted with the AIDS virus or who are HIV-positive. These mothers are often hospitalised for given periods, and the children are placed under alternative care. In collaboration with the *Conseil Général* the Relais opened a home, in March 1996, in the Paris suburb of Clamart in which three young female AIDS patients can live with their pre-school aged children. Constant medical, social and educational care is available within the home, and medical staff work in coordination with a nearby hospital. A sense of continuity is thus furnished: when the mother's condition requires her hospitalisation, the child will remain at the home to await her return. The mother and child are cared for by a nurse and an educator. Candidates for residency in the home will be put forth by a statutory committee handling welfare cases needing urgent attention. The projected length of residence will be six months, with the option of renewing the stay for an additional six months if necessary.

Chapter 7

Conclusions: moving into the future

A conclusion, by definition, implies finality, a culmination, something coming to an end, whether a phase, an era or a book. But the conclusion to this book on the issues surrounding the children of prisoners is, by definition, a point of departure: a departure towards a new awareness by the general and expert public of what these children require; a departure towards a shift in priorities *vis-à-vis* these children; a departure towards a new interpretation of relevant laws according to the child's best interests; a departure towards the recognition of children's rights.

Examining the issues surrounding imprisoned parents' children is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although long-term studies of this category of children have yet to be carried out, short-term observations of children who have renewed contact with an imprisoned parent have revealed a clear trend towards improved concentration and school performance, a higher degree of self-expression and extrovert behaviour, better social skills, and a more acute sense of general well-being – children tapping into their own potential to becoming healthy, viable adults.

As previously established, defining a statutory channel for the children of prisoners is not only in the child's best interests, but also in the best interests of society. Working towards a child's socialisation is to work towards the early social prevention of crime, with repercussions reaching far beyond solely curbing crime.

The need for greater flexibility in determining forms of punishment for certain offences must be brought to the fore, thus allowing exceptions – such as permitting two parents to serve prison terms consecutively, making an inmate eligible for home leave earlier in the prison term, delaying a parent's sentence if a child is gravely ill, or serving short terms at home while on remand with the use of electronic identification tags – to become the rule for certain categories of offences. This would not only permit a child to

maintain the bond with a 'punished' parent; it would lower costs to society as well.

The cost of placing a child in France, with payment to the foster family, A.S.E. and various social workers overseeing the transition, amounts to over USD 3,500 a month per child,[1] for the entire duration of the prison term. This is an even more salient issue when it is considered that inmates in France have been progressively receiving longer sentences over the past 10 years.[2]

The Relais Enfants-Parents will work to further these exceptions until they become the rule. The organisation aims to strengthen its leverage by establishing a *Observatoire National*, a 'national observatory', whose initial goal will be to define and propose guidelines and modes of intervention, which professionals can follow when confronted with situations involving the children of prisoners. These guidelines would bring the child's perspective into focus and act as a *mode d'emploi* for these professionals. The Observatory could supply the police with guidelines on how to react to a child at the moment of the parent's arrest: to speak to the child in words understandable to him or her and to explain the situation, emphasising that the parent will not be hurt. School teachers confronted with a situation in which a pupil is ostracised and bullied by peers as a result of having an imprisoned parent would be helped to realise that they should focus on the victims, not the bullies, and should work with the children on how they can best respond to taunting and aggression. The next step, through Observatory guidelines, would focus on how teachers can present the imprisoned parents' situation to their classes. How can educators best tell children the truth about their imprisoned parents? What tips can be given to judges and social workers in dealing with this category of children?

The Observatory would form a watchdog committee to ensure that professionals respect the rights of prisoners' children in their decision making and continuously remind the authorities of the existence of these children. It could also become a reservoir of innovative ideas for promoting the cause of prisoners' children, and could call upon public powers and the press to impose alternative models for reform.

In addition, the Relais aims to expand its activities within the prisons in which it is already present to ensure that each prison is equipped with an *espace enfant* and to intensify its work with fathers. Another aim is further progression in dealing with incest, by providing alternative holistic and social solutions to imprisonment, while taking advantage of the protective aspects of

prisons in initiating therapy. The Relais is adding an action-research dimension to its counselling work, and hopes to conduct an investigative programme with several professional partners to explore all factors which come into play in sexual abuse. The ultimate goal will be to outline common patterns and warning signs, and propose a prevention campaign to the Justice Ministry which targets fathers. Thus far, most prevention campaigns have focused on the child.

Society's lack of understanding towards children of imprisoned parents may stem from an incapacity to empathise: those who are born into intact families might understand that the absence of a parent will have an impact on a child's emotional and psychological development, but they cannot empathise with the legacy that this absence bestows on a child. An example of the lack of empathy is the question often heard during the writing of this book: 'don't you think that there are better role models for these children than parents who are in prison?' This type of reaction misses the point, which is that the parent-child bond inherently exists. It cannot be replaced, but must be taken into account, and salvaged and renewed whenever possible. This is the Relais' point of departure.

Notes and references

1. This is an estimate by Relais Enfants-Parents.

2. *Rapport annuel d'activité*, 1994, Administration Penitentiaire, Ministère de la Justice.

Foundation Publications

In search of the rainbow: Pathways to quality in large-scale programmes for young disadvantaged children

Martin Woodhead (ECD: Practice and Reflections No 10)
Our perception of 'quality' in early childhood programmes can be likened to our perception of a rainbow. Composed as it is of sunshine and rain, it changes with every shift in perspective. And just as people have searched for the illusory crock of gold at the rainbow's end, so development experts search for universal definitions and standards of quality. But quality is contextual. Drawing on examples from several countries, Martin Woodhead argues that sensitivity to diversity and to one's own preconceptions should be key elements informing all early childhood work.
Published 1995. ISBN 90-6195-042-2

We did it ourselves – *Sinn Fhein a rinn e*: an account of the Western Isles Community Education Project – *Proiseict Muinntir nan Eilean*, 1977-1992

David Mackay (ECD: Practice and Reflections No 9)
The scattered communities of the Western Isles of Scotland are among the most physically isolated in Europe. They have also had to battle for generations to preserve their distinctive linguistic and cultural traditions. The Western Isles Community Education Project built on the experience, commitment and resourcefulness of local people, and established an independent voice for young children and their parents in the form of a network of playgroups that continues to flourish. This book relates how, if we persevere, we can do it ourselves.
Published 1996. ISBN 90-6195-039-2

A guide to promoting resilience in children: strengthening the human spirit

Edith Grotberg, Ph.D. (ECD: Practice and Reflections No 8)
Resilience is a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimise or overcome the damaging effects of adversity. Results from 14 countries that participated in the International Resilience Project show that fewer than half of the adults caring for children promote resilience in them. This Guide, based on the findings, will help individuals and programmes to incorporate the promotion of resilience into their work with children.
Published 1995. ISBN 90-6195-038-4

We are your children: the Kushanda early childhood education and care dissemination programme, Zimbabwe 1985-1993

Salih Booker (ECD: Practice and Reflections No 7)
The Kushanda Project takes its name from the Shona expression, *Kushandisa zviripo*, which means 'to use what is there', or, 'to make what is there work'. This saying not only captures the Project's spirit of self-reliance, but also the fact that for the children of Zimbabwe's rural majority, early childhood services were only likely to become accessible if their parents learned how to use the material and human resources available in the immediate environment to make community-based pre-schools a reality. Kushanda's mission was to show how this could be done.
Published 1995. ISBN 90-6195-036-8

The environment of the child

Terezinha Nunes (Occasional Paper No 5)
This paper outlines models of children's socio-cultural environments and examines two characteristics of many children's environments – poverty and discrimination. It also includes a review of the literature about the environmental factors which influence children's development.
Published 1994. ISBN 90-6195-026-0 (also available in Spanish)

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A small association in France has been waging a quiet battle to bring the children of prisoners – the 'forgotton children' – to the fore of social, political and judicial policy. The *Relais Enfants-Parents* works to safeguard the psychological and emotional development of children by serving as a link between them and their imprisoned parents. It tries to preserve, and often to re-create, the bond between the children and their parents which separation often weakens. Initially facing resistance from the penal system and doubt from imprisoned parents, this book shows how the *Relais Enfants-Parents* persevered – not taking no for an answer.

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